

# Sovereignty and The Event

in

John D. Caputo's Radical Theology

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*Dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University*

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April 2019

# Declaration

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April 2019

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# Acknowledgements

To my supervisor, Prof Robert Vosloo, thank you for journeying with me for a second time. Your unwavering support and generous feedback have improved this thesis beyond any effort of my own. I am proud to be among those who can call themselves Voslonians! To my family, thank you for making the many kilometers that separate four continents feel like nothing more than a short walk into the next room. Your precious phone calls are the lifeblood of this thesis. To all the friends who have endured the travails and kept me from falling into the abyss, I am in your debt. To those involved in making my time at the University of Tübingen possible (including the Evangelisches Stift), my sincerest thanks. I will remember with fondness those evenings on the Neckar River; a good Swabian beer in one hand and a thickly buttered Bretzel in the other. To Prof Graham Ward, thank you for your kindness and hospitality shown to me during the Trinity term of 2018 at Christ Church, Oxford. The summer strolls in the meadow and the sublime echoes of evensong will be memories not easily forgotten. To Prof Rebekka Klein, thank you for granting me both flexibility and freedom to complete this thesis on time—I look forward to working with you in Bochum. I would also like to acknowledge the following institutions, administrative bodies, bursary funds and the people behind them, and register my sincere thanks for their varied support in the completion of this project: The Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch, The Stellenbosch University International Office, The HB & MJ Thom Scholarship Fund, The Baden-Württemberg Stipendium and The Giovanni Omodeo Stiftung.

# Abstract

The notion of sovereignty is the fundamental idea informing democratic society insofar as it defines the principle that a nation or a people have the 'right' or 'force' to decide their own actions without external coercion. Indeed, thanks to the 'political theology' of the influential German theorist, Carl Schmitt, this definition is said to derive its meaning both historically and *theologically* from the idea of a 'sovereign God.' In the context of the contemporary 'crisis of democracy,' it is the idea of sovereignty that continues to be either undermined or abused and, therefore, raises the question of the 'theological foundations' – or the political theology – of sovereignty. Political-theological reflection on the concept of sovereignty, particularly in South Africa, often articulates that the sovereignty of God is to be affirmed not to prop-up theocratic abuses of power, but precisely to relativize all claimants to absolute power. Accordingly, it maintains the theological claim that God is sovereign but distances itself from any vision that would legitimize the state. This study offers a different approach to both the 'old' political theology – where God's sovereignty is used to prop-up the state – as well as to 'new' political theology – where God's sovereignty always exceeds and thus keeps the state in check. It seeks, rather, to raise the question of the foundations of political sovereignty not by out-rightly affirming that God is sovereign, but by exploring the implications and possibilities of thinking about God *without* sovereignty. It therefore determines to articulate what is called a 'radical political theology.' To arrive at a *radical* political theology, the study considers the contributions of the American philosopher of religion, John D. Caputo. It begins with the origins of Caputo's philosophical development in the thought of Martin Heidegger, before turning to his creative theological appropriation of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. Through Derrida, Caputo develops an original approach to theology that emphasizes a God who is 'weak,' not a divine omnipotent Being and *without* sovereignty. He formulates a 'theology of event' or 'radical theology' where God is devoid of all authoritarian power, strength, and authority, and instead is better thought of as a 'weak force,' a name for what he calls an 'event.' The event is an interruption into the order of things for which one cannot be prepared. God, as a name for an event is an unexpected and disruptive force, which calls on us to be expectant for the infinite possibility of transformation and hope for a world that could always be otherwise. A God *without* sovereignty, therefore, is not simply a God without power, but rather God's power is re-inscribed as a 'weak force' that lays claim on us. The study then considers what Caputo calls radical theology's *theo-poetics*, offered as an alternative to classical theo-logic. The latter describes a mode of theological reflection that is still keyed into the logics of divine Being, while the former is a poetical discourse that gives voice to

‘events.’ Finally, as a conclusion and an answer to the challenge of articulating a radical political theology, the study proposes that the discourse of theo-poetics provides the discursive resources of a radical political theology that can imagine God *without* sovereignty. With this answer the study will have made a novel contribution in two important ways: first it will have provided an original alternative to contemporary political-theological reflection with respect to the democratic question of theological foundations. Secondly, since Caputo’s thought generally operates in the fields of theology and continental philosophy of religion, this study will have made a significant claim for the status of his work to be considered as a ‘political theology.’

# Opsomming

Soewereiniteit is 'n begrip wat die grondslag lê vir die vorming van 'n demokratiese samelewing in sover as wat dit die beginsel omskryf dat 'n nasie of 'n volk die 'reg' of die 'mag' het om te besluit oor hulle eie aksies sonder dwang. Dit is te danke aan die 'politieke teologie' van die invloedryke Duitse teoretikus, Carl Schmitt, dat hierdie definisie beide histories en *teologies* afgelei word van die idee van 'n 'soewereine God'. Binne die konteks van die kontemporêre 'krisis van demokrasie,' word die idee van soewereiniteit steeds óf geminag óf misbruik, en gevolglik is dit nodig om die 'teologiese grondslag'—of die politieke teologie—van soewereiniteit te bevraagteken. Politieke-teologiese refleksie oor die konsep van soewereiniteit, veral in Suid-Afrika, gee gehoor daaraan dat die soewereiniteit van God bevestig moet word, nie om 'n teokratiese misbruik van mag te regverdig nie, maar juis om alle eisers van absolute mag te relativeer. Dit volstaan dus by die teologiese siening dat God soewerein is, sonder om noodwendig legitimititeit aan die staat te gee. Hierdie studie bied 'n andersoortige benadering tot 'ou' politieke teologie—waar God se soewereiniteit gebruik word om die staat te bekragtig—sowel as 'nuwe' politieke teologie—waar God se soewereiniteit altyd die mag van die staat oorskrei en dus staatsmag kan reguleer. Die studie poog eerder om die grondslag van politieke soewereiniteit te bevraagteken deur nie God se soewereiniteit as gegewe te aanvaar nie, maar deur die implikasies en moontlikhede te probeer ontgin van 'n besinning van God *sonder* soewereiniteit. Dit is dus 'n poging om 'n 'radikale politieke teologie' te omskryf. Om by so 'n *radikale* politieke teologie uit te kom, weeg die studie die bydraes op van die Amerikaanse filosoof van godsdiens, John D. Caputo. Dit begin met die oorsprong van Caputo se filosofiese ontwikkeling in Martin Heidegger se werk, en fokus dan op sy kreatiewe teologiese bewilliging van die Franse filosoof, Jacques Derrida. Deur Derrida, ontwikkel Caputo 'n oorspronklike benadering tot teologie wat klem lê op 'n 'swak' God, en nie 'n alomteenwoordige goddelike Wese nie, een *sonder* soewereiniteit. Hy omskryf 'n 'teologie van gebeurtenis' of 'radikale teologie' waar God sonder enige outoritêre mag, krag, of outoriteit is, en eerder aan gedink kan word as 'n 'swak krag,' die naam wat hy toeskryf aan 'n 'gebeurtenis'. Die gebeurtenis is 'n onverwagse onderbreking waaroor 'n mens nie voorbereid kan wees nie. God, as 'n naam vir 'n gebeurtenis is 'n onverwagse en ontwrigtende mag, wat ons oproep om met verwagting gereed te staan vir die oneindige moontlikheid van transformasie en hoop vir 'n wêreld wat altyd anders kan wees. 'n God *sonder* soewereiniteit is dus nie 'n God sonder mag nie, maar eerder God se mag wat herskryf word as 'n 'swak krag' en aan ons 'n eis stel. Hierdie studie bestudeer dan wat Caputo noem radikale teologie se *theo-poetics*, wat as 'n alternatief gebied

word vir 'n klassieke *theo-logic*. Die laasgenoemde beskryf 'n wyse van teologiese refleksie wat steeds getoonset is op die logika van 'n goddelike Wese, terwyl die eersgenoemde 'n digterlike diskoers is wat uitdrukking gee aan 'gebeurtenisse'. Ten slotte, om saam te vat en 'n antwoord te bied op die uitdaging om 'n radikale politieke teologie te omskryf, stel die studie voor dat die diskoerse van theo-poetics die nodige gesprek-gerigte hulpbronne bied van 'n radikale politieke teologie wat God kan voorstel *sonder* soewereiniteit. Met hierdie gevolgtrekking sou die studie 'n nuwe bydra gelewer het op twee belangrike terreine: eerstens sou dit 'n oorspronklike alternatief gebied het tot kontemporêre politieke-teologiese refleksie met betrekking tot die demokratiese vraag na 'n teologiese grondslag. Tweedens, aangesien Caputo se werk in die algemeen binne teologie en kontinentale filosofie van godsdienstilosofie bestudeer word, sou hierdie studie 'n wesenlike aanspraak gemaak het op die status van sy werk om as 'politieke teologie' beskou te kon word.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

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*What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one.*

— Jacques Lacan<sup>1</sup>

The question of the master that the psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, raises here, or the ‘sovereign’ in the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, as we will see shortly, is the fundamental political-theological question which motivates the present study. On the one hand, the master or sovereign figure is a political one, not only because it has to do with power and authority, but also because it raises questions of political legitimacy, autonomy, freedom and democracy. On the other hand, the concept of the master/sovereign has also a particular *theological* resonance, and to that extent will require theological reflection. The point of departure for this theological resonance is obtained from the political theorist Carl Schmitt, who can be credited with bringing the concept of political theology back into twentieth and twenty-first century debate. In its most basic form, Schmitt’s hypothesis was that the political sovereign receives its conceptual force from the sovereign omnipotent God. It is this God, it will be argued, which will need to be reflected upon, lest we acquire a new master that we neither want nor deserve.

The importance of Jacques Derrida for this study lies not only in the connections he makes with Carl Schmitt, but also in his influence on its central interlocutor, the American philosopher and theologian, John D. Caputo.<sup>2</sup> While Derrida’s writing contains a number of theological characteristics, it is Caputo’s work which has become most well-known for its theological interpretation of Derrida. Since the political-theological concept of sovereignty requires *theological* reflection, and because Derrida does not engage this systematically himself, the aim of this study can be said to be an exploration of John D. Caputo’s ‘radical theology of the event,’ as an exemplary site in which this reflection takes place. It will be argued, more specifically, that Caputo’s radical theology presents resources to reimagine the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), Russell Grigg (trans.) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), pg. 207.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo is presently the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and the David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University.

sovereign and thus aims to contribute to resolving the ongoing quandary of the status of theological sovereignty and its relation not only to the political, but also to ethics and religion.

To this end, the scope of this study consists in a systematic *theoretical* and philosophical-theological reflection on the work of John D. Caputo. While taking its point of departure from the theological-political sense of sovereignty given by Carl Schmitt, the study traces this concept through Caputo's oeuvre as it specifically interacts in the various domains of his thought with what is called 'the event.' The event in this study functions heuristically as an organizing concept that demarcates the unique contributions of Caputo's philosophical and theological project. From the philosophical influence of Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach, Caputo incorporates the concept of the 'event' into a 'radical theology' that not only challenges dominant modes of theological discourse, but also offers an alternative and novel mode of theological reflection. This mode of reflection, which Caputo calls 'theopoetics,' undermines traditional notions of God and theology insofar as the latter is a 'logical' discourse which mediates on the former as both an omnipotent and sovereign Being. Theopoetics, on the other hand, suggests a mode of reflection which tries to think of God *without* sovereignty. To think of God *without* sovereignty is to think of a 'weak' God beyond the order of a Supreme Being or Infinite Entity. The study will show, however, that 'God's weakness' does not mean 'God's impotence' but rather alludes to a 'weak force' of God which lays claim on us. Theopoetics is the discourse that attempts to articulate this weak force and, therefore, will be central to the project of imagining a God *without* sovereignty.

As the study hopes to demonstrate, to think or imagine a God *without* sovereignty is not just a cerebral exercise, but is an urgent and necessary task requiring sustained theological reflection. Reasons for this reside in the conviction that modern democratic life is not a value-free zone, but is rather imbued with theological concepts. To the extent that sovereignty is one of these central concepts that continues to influence the way in which democracy is both conceived and carried out, it cannot be left to the realm of political or legal theory. As will become clearer below, much theological reflection has already sought to interrogate the dangers of a political theology of sovereignty which might serve as justification for potentially violent political ambitions. To this extent, theological reflection has usually consisted in submitting alternative political theologies that conceive God's sovereignty as a *transcending* force that is able to critique 'this-worldly' projects of statecraft. While this study affirms such political-theological approaches, it would argue that maintaining this connection to God's sovereignty is always a risk, no matter how transcendent it is of the political realm. Therefore,

by running together this political-theological notion of sovereignty and Caputo's theopoetics of radical theology – which imagines a God *without* sovereignty – the study attempts to formulate a 'radical *political* theology' that might not only be more prepared to manage this risk, but which also offers an original and 'constructive' mode of theological discourse with which to engage political challenges.

## I. Introduction, Rationale, Delimitation

At the genesis of this project, universities across South Africa were emerging from a wave of student protests. What started at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg in January 2015 as a small demonstration relating to defaulting fee payments, soon took a dramatic turn far exceeding the critical failures of South Africa's National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) – the purported source of the tension at the time. The defining moment occurred on Monday, the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 2015, when Chumani Maxwele, a student of the University of Cape Town (UCT), hurled human excrement onto a large concrete statue located in the center of UCT's campus. The statue was that of the notorious British mining magnate, former prime minister of the Cape Colony, and veritable symbol of colonial imperialism, Cecil John Rhodes. The hashtag #RhodesMustFall began trending across the country and beyond, even igniting protests at Rhodes' alma mater at Oriel College, Oxford.<sup>3</sup> Exactly one month later the statue had been removed from UCT's campus.

But Pandora's box had been proverbially opened. Catalyzed by the resistance of university executive bodies to amend tuition fee policies, as well those events at UCT, activist groups and self-styled 'movements' began forming across campuses. It became quickly clear, however, given the diversity of issues being raised,<sup>4</sup> that what was at stake did not simply reside in university access or the presence of colonial statues. Two underlying but significantly inter-related objects of discontent could be identified. The first was the perceived failure of the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), to make good on its promises of a 'post-apartheid' era that would inaugurate a new dispensation of prosperity, at least, that is, for a generation of 'born-free' black youth – those born after the formal end of

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<sup>3</sup> Alex Waygood, "Rhodes Must Fall: A Timeline," The Poor Print: Oriel College Newspaper, [www.thepoorprint.com/2017/04/28/rhodes-must-fall-a-timeline/](http://www.thepoorprint.com/2017/04/28/rhodes-must-fall-a-timeline/) (27 April, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> At Stellenbosch University, for example, a historically white Afrikaans institution, the 'Open Stellenbosch' movement that mobilized in April, called for greater inclusion by means of adjusting the university language policy, which, they argued, ultimately excluded students whose first language was not Afrikaans. See Tammy Peterson, "Students protest in Stellenbosch over language," News24, [www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Students-protest-in-Stellenbosch-over-language-20150727](http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Students-protest-in-Stellenbosch-over-language-20150727) (27 July, 2015).

the apartheid regime. Along with the devastation caused by the pillaging of state resources, cronyism, and corruption across the echelons of government, which marked and culminated in the demise of Jacob Zuma and parts of his administration, there was also the claim that the ANC had simply not pursued a more progressive social economic agenda. The problem was an old one. With the loss of its principle support after the collapse of the Soviet Union, here was a new political power without money, while old money (the Apartheid government) was left without power. In the midst of the compromises with white-owned business, the majority of black people, it was argued, were left behind.<sup>5</sup>

The second object of discontent underpinning the latter, was perhaps the more pernicious meta-historical narrative of colonialism. At the university but also in wider public discourse, this was variously referred to as the persistence of 'white privilege.' This phenomenon was not only to be found in the celebratory symbolic status accorded to colonial statues or even in acts of overt racism, but more invasively in an *experience* of 'coloniality,'<sup>6</sup> or what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano called, 'the coloniality of power.'<sup>7</sup> This experience is best defined in a structurally and often shrewdly-maintained cycle of white superiority, informing everything from university policies, economic models, private sector workspace, classroom teaching, to knowledge production. In short, South Africa's colonial history perpetuated in structural forms of oppression and exclusion, ANC negligence and commitment to liberal models for economic growth – which not only covered over these oppressions but exacerbated them – as well as the effects of government corruption, were all combined to loosely define a nebulous edifice which, it was argued, needed exposing in order to fundamentally influence a truly transformed post-apartheid South Africa.

Whatever is to be made of this abridged assessment of the present South African situation, which is still to say nothing of the highly-contested solution proposals, one need only conduct a rudimentary survey to observe a subsequent proliferation of analysis seeking to vigorously interrogate this colonial legacy, whether in public forums or the academy. Indeed, through

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<sup>5</sup> See Roger Southall, "How ANC's path to corruption was set in South Africa's 1994 transition," *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/how-ancs-path-to-corruption-was-set-in-south-africas-1994-transition-64774> (6 Sep, 2016); see also Roger Southall, "The ANC for Sale? Money, Morality and Business in South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 35. 116 (Oct, 2008), pp. 281-299.

<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps worth drawing a distinction following Ramón Grosfoguel between colonialism and coloniality: the latter is the "continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system." See Ramón Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms" in *Cultural Studies* 21. 2-3 (March/May, 2007), pp. 211-223, pg. 219.

<sup>7</sup> See Aníbal Quijano, Michael Ennis (trans.), "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" in *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (Sep, 2000), pp. 533-580.

the sea of online articles, academic publications, workshops, public conversations and books, it would be difficult to deny a shift in tone and sense of urgency in public and academic reflection initiated by those protests almost four years ago.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that the motivations for this study and the epigraph from Lacan coincide.

Lacan's famous remarks to disgruntled students on the third of December 1969, at the newly established 'experimental' Université de Paris VIII at Vincennes (included at the end of Seminar XVII: 'The Other Side of Psychoanalysis') follow the widely commented on revolts of May 1968. In the gathering from where these comments were recorded, Lacan was faced with a series of heckling students who wanted him to perform a 'self-criticism,' since they were disgusted at the formalized inclusion of psychoanalysis in the university.<sup>9</sup> Psychoanalysis, they thought, was the discourse which provided the means by which the bureaucratization of the university could be undermined. Instead, by creating a department of psychoanalysis, the disruptive and non-formalizable nature of the discourse, they argued, was now being coopted into the university itself. Though sympathetic with the students, Lacan's tone toward them, as his biographer Élisabeth Roudinesco noted, was more of a 'stern father,' perhaps even a little authoritarian.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, the question could be asked, was the threat of psychoanalysis to the university not found in its marginal status but rather in the inherent anti-egalitarianism of its master-slave/analyst-analysand dialectic? As one of the hecklers put it, "[w]e already have priests, but since that was no longer working, we now have psychoanalysts."<sup>11</sup>

As Stephen Frosh points out, in the aftermath of '68 Lacan was certainly convinced of the radical potential of psychoanalysis, as the distinction between the famous 'four discourses' (Master, Hysteric, University and the Analyst) makes clear. In university discourse "knowledge loses its capacity to radicalize," since it is 'flattened' and 'bureaucratized,'

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<sup>8</sup> No doubt, thinking through the effects of colonialism has existed since the very beginnings of colonialism itself. Indeed, a 'decolonial turn' (a term now frequently invoked in the literature and discourse) as an active project was announced already in the twentieth century in a line of thinkers stemming from W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimée Césaire and Franz Fanon. See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy and Critique – An Introduction" in *Transmodernity* 1. 2 (Fall, 2011). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59w8j02x>. The claim being made here, simply, is that the protests ignited something of an urgency to an already ongoing discussion.

<sup>9</sup> The Department of Psychoanalysis would be the first of its kind in the French university system and would fall under the umbrella of the Department of Philosophy, headed by Michel Foucault. It boasted a fresh list of admirable young philosophers, including: Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and Jean-François Lyotard. See Stephen Frosh, "Everyone Longs for a Master: Lacan and 1968" in Gurinder K. Bhabra and Ipek Demir (eds.) *1968 in Retrospect: History, Theory, Alterity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 100-112; pp. 100-101.

<sup>10</sup> Élisabeth Roudinesco, Barbara Bray (trans.) *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pg. 343.

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, pg. 200.

whereas psychoanalysis “calls this kind of knowledge into question.” Consequently, “what happens ‘in’ the university is at odds with psychoanalysis, even when psychoanalysis appears in the university itself, and even when what happens in the university is a rebellion against the university.”<sup>12</sup> Lacan’s point to the students was that it does not matter whether you are ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ rebelling against the system, you are always ‘stamped’ by the mode of university knowledge. Another student’s interjection, saying that they did not understand Lacan’s usage of the word ‘aphasic,’ illustrates his point:<sup>13</sup> revolutionary display from ‘outside’ of the university is nothing more than just that, a display of ignorance (the student doesn’t understand basic Greek) which is, itself, put on display. With condescension, Lacan replied: “for you fulfil the role of helots of this regime. You don’t know what that means either? The regime is putting you on display. It says, ‘Look at them enjoying!’”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the revolutionary impulse of the students is ultimately a search for a more totalizing university discourse and “this search for unity produces totalitarianism in the form of a master — and in hunting for revolutionary upheaval in the way that they do, that is where the students will end up.”<sup>15</sup> The new master which the students got in the end one recalls, was an even stronger Gaullist party.

With prescient insight, as the renowned Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has been variously elaborating for the last couple of decades, Lacan’s words about the master’s return continue to haunt movements which agitate against the dominant global-economic and western-democratic apparatus, including the likes of Occupy Wall Street, the *Indignados* in Spain or Syriza in Greece. Referring to Occupy, Žižek describes the art of politics as the insistence on a demand that is ‘realistic’ insofar as it disturbs the hegemonic order, but which is also de facto impossible. The paradox, therefore, is that “we should indeed endeavor to mobilize people around such demands — however, it is no less important to remain simultaneously *subtracted* from the pragmatic field of negotiations and ‘concrete’ proposals.”<sup>16</sup> Žižek’s political analysis here is an expansion on the central Lacanian insight that a true revolution is the *Freudian* revolution, according to which the desire for total knowledge is suspended in the process of ‘transference’ when the analysand comes to realize that the analyst is *not* ‘the one who knows.’ The subject is thus left to fall upon its divided-self or what

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<sup>12</sup> Frosh, “Everyone Longs for a Master,” pp. 102-103.

<sup>13</sup> “But outside what? Because when you leave here you become aphasic? When you leave here you continue to speak, consequently you continue to be inside. INTERVENTION: *I do not know what aphasic is.* You do not know what aphasic is? That’s extremely revolting. You don’t what an aphasic is? There is a minimum one has to know, nevertheless.” Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, pg. 208.

<sup>15</sup> Frosh, “Everyone Longs for a Master,” pg. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (London: Verso, 2012), pg. 84.



Lacan called the *pas-tout* (non-all/non-whole): “without this *pas-tout*, there will always be a demand for a master.”<sup>17</sup>

Lacanian psychoanalysis and especially the conceptualization of Freudian subjectivity allows one to view the student protests through a helpful critical framework. Reflecting on the recent protests in South Africa, the philosopher, Achille Mbembe remarks, “the winds blowing from our campuses can be felt afar...it goes by the name ‘decolonization’ – in truth a *psychic state* more than a political project.”<sup>18</sup> While Mbembe is categorical, “this is not ‘68,”<sup>19</sup> it is not difficult to discern and consequently evaluate the protests through the Lacanian lens as others have done at length.<sup>20</sup> We will not, however, pursue this line any further. Instead, this contextual heuristic and in particular the reference to the ‘master’ functions as a pivot for introducing the central concerns of this study.

In its most basic form, the consequence of ‘68 was the decline of the old (authoritarian) master and the emergence of the new master-figure in the form of the ‘expert’ (university discourse). The problem, as Žižek points out, is that these experts show themselves not to be experts or masters at all and hence we have the unsurprising return of the strong-man authoritarian who inspires the populist alternative.<sup>21</sup> Much of this can be mapped onto the South African situation – the decline of the old colonial master or the Apartheid state, only to be replaced by a new regime of experts that are struggling to consolidate a positive social vision in the context of a young and vulnerable democracy. The students require a master. But the question that emerges is what will the precise character of this new master be? It can neither be the return of the authoritarian nor the depoliticizing neutrality of ‘university discourse.’ This

<sup>17</sup> Frosh, “Everyone Longs for a Master,” pg. 100.

<sup>18</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The State of South African Political Life,” *Africa Is A Country*, [www.africaisacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics](http://www.africaisacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics) (19 Sep, 2015). Although short, this concise essay provided an accessible statement of the state of South African politics during 2015, it was also widely disseminated.

<sup>19</sup> This is taken from an excerpt of Mbembe’s “Diary of My South African Years” that was published online: see Achille Mbembe, “Theodor Adorno vs Herbert Marcuse on student protests, violence and democracy,” *First Thing* – Daily Maverick, <http://firstthing.dailymaverick.co.za/article?id=73620> (accessed on: 27 Oct, 2018). This psychic state can be understood as characteristic of a larger phenomenon that is shaping the twenty-first century, what Mbembe as recently called a ‘politics of enmity.’ See Achille Mbembe, Giovanni Menegalle (trans.) “The Society of Enmity” in *Radical Philosophy* 200 (Nov/Dec, 2016), pp. 23-35. This article is a translation of chapter two of Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l’inimitié* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> See Bert Olivier for example, “Protests, ‘acting out’, group psychology, surplus enjoyment and neo-liberal capitalism” in *Psychology in Society*, 53 (2017), pp. 30-50.

<sup>21</sup> As Žižek recently comments, “recall how the experts in Brussels acted in negotiations with Greece’s Syriza government during the euro crisis in 2014: no debate, this has to be done. I think today’s populism reacts to the fact that experts are not really masters, that their expertise doesn’t work.” See Slavoj Žižek, “Are liberals and populists just searching for a new master? A book excerpt and interview with Slavoj Žižek,” *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/10/08/are-liberals-and-populists-just-searching-for-a-new-master> (8 Oct, 2018).



question, therefore, raises the issue of the complex relationship between mastery or the analogous notion of sovereignty and the (theological) foundations that constitute democratic life. To pursue this question further, this study will draw on the insights of Jacques Derrida as they are specifically taken up in the work of John D. Caputo and his radical theology.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we introduce the ‘two axes’ taken from the title i.e. ‘sovereignty and the event.’ With respect to the former, we will discuss the conditions in which sovereignty emerges as both a political and theological concept, and which finds its modern articulation in Carl Schmitt. This will allow us to reflect on the reception of Schmitt’s thought, as well as to make further remarks regarding his contribution to the study. With respect to the latter, we will refer to Caputo’s radical theology of event. We will distinguish Caputo’s radical theology from other radical theological projects before further situating his own work and introducing his core theological contribution. The introduction concludes by presenting the problem statement, question, method, and thesis, followed by the chapter outlines.

## I. Of Sovereignty

On the way to formulating an answer to the question of the master figure in politics, it is useful to refer to it with another figure, namely, that of the sovereign. The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (a contemporary of Lacan), in his last seminars conducted before his death explicitly links the master to the sovereign: “the master (and what is said of the master is easily transferable to the first of all, the prince, the sovereign), the master is he who is said to be, and who can say ‘himself’ to be, the (self-)same, ‘myself.’”<sup>22</sup> Derrida continues, expanding on this definition:

The concept of sovereignty will always imply the possibility of this positionality, this thesis, this self-thesis, this autoposition of him who posits or posits himself as *ipse, the (self-)same, oneself*. And that will be just as much the case for all the ‘firsts,’ for the sovereign as princely person, the monarch or the emperor or the dictator, as for the people in a democracy, or even for the citizen-subject in the exercise of his sovereign liberty (for example, when he votes or places his secret ballot in the box,

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<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington (trans.), Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (eds.) *The Beast and The Sovereign* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [2009] 2011), pg. 67.

sovereignly). In sum, wherever there is a decision worthy of the name, in the classical sense of the term.

In this description of the master/sovereign Derrida consciously implicates a wide scope of the tradition of liberal modernity in the semantic field of a certain *political theology*. Despite early-modern efforts to imagine an immanent account of human nature (Bodin, Hobbes, Vico, Machiavelli) – exemplified in Vico’s famous aphorism, *verum esse ipsum factum* (‘what is true is precisely what is made’)<sup>23</sup> – Derrida concludes, nonetheless, that these attempts at ‘anthropologization, modernization and secularization’ remain “essentially attached by the skein of a double umbilical cord.”<sup>24</sup> On the one side of this double connection Derrida refers to *imitation*, which describes the ‘human’ institution of the state as “copies of the work of God.” On the other side, he speaks of a (Christian) logic of *lieutenance* – of the human sovereign as the taking-place of God (*tient lieu de Dieu*) and as place-taking (*lieu-tenant*): “the place standing in for the absolute sovereign: God.”<sup>25</sup> To those unfamiliar with Derrida, such comments might be jolting for modern sensibilities. How is it that such language of God and Christianity, or even religion, could be spoken in such proximity to the political order?

The possibility for such claims arise in what is now a well-documented phenomenon; viz. the crisis of secular-liberal modernity in which religion once banished from the public sphere has made a tremendous comeback.<sup>26</sup> This (re)turn or ‘resurgence’ is not merely private religiosity but in a number of particular ways quite public and therefore political.<sup>27</sup> The crucial move of modernity was to maintain the link between classical liberalism and secularism: the value-free space of the former in which the market could operate untethered, combined with the ideological assumption of the latter that religion could be separated from public life. However,

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<sup>23</sup> See Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014), pp. 6-9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pg. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See for example; Hans Joas, *Faith as Option: Possible Futures for Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), Charles Taylor’s, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview”, in Peter L. Berger (ed). *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), Sharpe, M. and Nickelson, D. (eds.), *Secularisations and Their Debates: Perspectives on the Return of Religion in the Contemporary West*, (Springer, 2014), William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and Talal Assad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Graham Ward, for example, speaks of ‘resurgence’ or ‘the new visibility of religion,’ rather than ‘return.’ For him return implies continuity with the past, but the ‘postsecular’ phenomenon has very little to do with old forms of religiosity he claims. For example, he indicates that mainline church attendance has declined, or if anything, has remained stagnant. Ward posits a threefold typology for describing this new visibility: Fundamentalism, Privatization, and Religion and Culture (in terms of its commodification). See Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), especially see chapter three, pp. 117-158.

the maintenance of this link has failed and the boundaries between the religious and the secular – and indeed, many of the modern distinctions: subject/object, faith/reason, theology/philosophy etc., – have become ever-more porous, leading some to wonder how modern we even were to begin with.<sup>28</sup> One important consequence of this ‘post-secular’ environment for this study, is that the resources of theology (or religion) used to interrogate questions of politics cannot be confined only to classical theological reflection, insofar as the very distinction between (political) theology and (political) philosophy is no longer secure. While further reasons and implications of the ‘post-modern’ or ‘post-secular’ will become clearer as the study progresses, it is in this context one can understand the recent fascination of a number of predominantly ‘secular’ thinkers who have begun to show interest in precisely the intellectual offerings of religion and theology. These include, among others, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Jean-Luc Nancy, Gianni Vattimo, and indeed, Jacques Derrida.

One of the first to consider this complex entanglement of ‘the political’ and ‘the theological’ in the twentieth century was the controversial conservative German political theorist, Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), most famously in his short book, *Political Theology* (1922).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is thanks to Schmitt that the term ‘political theology’ has re-entered the modern lexicon, which he most likely gathered from Baruch Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).<sup>30</sup> As a part of his incisive critique of Weimar liberalism, parliamentarianism, and cosmopolitanism, Schmitt put political theology to work through the concept of sovereignty by defining it as “he who decides on the exception”<sup>31</sup> with respect to the juridical-legal order. This understanding of sovereignty for his formulation of political theology was not an appeal to religious tradition for political legitimacy, but rather involved the claim that the political order is *structurally* analogous to a metaphysical reality. The primary analogue for this claim was to be found in the sovereign God, insofar as God is that which both founds the political order and simultaneously remains a part of and external to it. Schmitt’s argument went on to define the

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<sup>28</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1991] 1993). While this book had to do with the false distinction that modernity made between nature and society, it nonetheless captures well the general mood of the times.

<sup>29</sup> Carl Schmitt, George Schwab (trans). *Political Theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), originally published as Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1932).

<sup>30</sup> Despite the frequent reference to Schmitt as the originator of the phrase ‘political theology,’ he has no role in conceiving it. Indeed, apart from Spinoza, whom he certainly had read, the phrase also shows up in other literature, for example, Simon van Heenvliedt’s *Theologico-Politica Dissertatio* (Utrecht: Jacob Waterman, 1662). The earliest usage seems to date back to Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 B.C.E.), see Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.) *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 25-26.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

concept of politics in a circumscription that referred to an irreducible conflict between ‘friend and enemy,’ which he detailed in his second most-often cited book, *The Concept of the Political* (1932).<sup>32</sup> From these definitions, Schmitt derived the normative conclusion that the theological-political element of politics needed to be reclaimed. Infamously, he later became a member of the Nazi Party, with the after-effects generally casting political theology as a long anti-democratic and authoritarian shadow over the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> In chapter two of this study, Schmitt’s political theology and concept of sovereignty will be further elaborated and will be shown to culminate in what will be called a ‘politics of presence.’ This desire for presence, which is the desire of sovereignty itself, will be placed in consistent tension with the second axis of the study, i.e. the event. Given Schmitt’s contributions to political theology and the concept of sovereignty in particular, some further comments about his reception are necessary in order to situate and justify his inclusion into the present study.

After Schmitt’s defense of the political-theological heritage which must be reclaimed for modern politics, a number of critical responses were generated arising both before and after the Second World War. Some of these responses were historical-theological in nature, while others focused on secularization and the use of theological concepts in politics. To the former, the neo-Kantian legal scholar, Hans Kelsen, and the conservative theologian, Erik Peterson, both argued in different ways that Schmitt’s theory evaded the crucial Trinitarian aspect of theology.<sup>34</sup> Many years later, in *Political Theology II* (1969),<sup>35</sup> Schmitt responded to these criticisms arguing that they were based on theological dogma, whereas his interests were epistemological and had to do with the history of ideas.<sup>36</sup> Another series of critical responses to Schmitt, including Eric Voegelin, Jacob Taubes and Karl Löwith,<sup>37</sup> for example, were

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<sup>32</sup> Carl Schmitt, George Schwab (trans.) *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of the Political* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), originally published as *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1922).

<sup>33</sup> See Annika Thiem, “Schmittian Shadows and Contemporary Theological-Political Constellations,” *Social Research* 80. 1 (Spring, 2013), pp. 1-33. Thiem details a comprehensive reception history of Schmitt in this valuable essay.

<sup>34</sup> For Kelsen, a Trinitarian incarnational model restricts divine omnipotence implied by Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty, and rather forces the political order to bind itself to the concrete limitations of law. See Hans Kelsen, “Gott und Staat,” *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift Für Philosophie Der Kultur* 11 (1922), pp. 261-284, pg. 275. For Peterson, the combination of Trinitarian theology and Augustinian eschatology, refutes the claim of hierarchal sovereignty on the one hand, and on the other, necessarily requires the provisional nature of any political order and at the same time disallows such a thing as Christian political theology. See Erik Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire” in Erik Peterson, Michael J. Hollerich (ed.) *Theological Tractatus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1953] 2011), pp. 68-105.

<sup>35</sup> Carl Schmitt, Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (trans.) *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of and Political Theology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Thiem, “Schmittian Shadows,” pg. 7.

<sup>37</sup> For Taubes’ relationship with Schmitt see the appendices, including two letters, in Jacob Taubes, Dana Hollander (trans.), Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (eds.) *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 97-113. See also Jacob Taubes, Keith Tribe (trans.) with introduction by Mike Grimshaw, *To Carl Schmitt*.

concerned about the negative influences of theological concepts on philosophies of history. Walter Benjamin, in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), drew particular attention to the fact that sovereignty was not the structural analogue to an omnipotent God, but rather emerged as an *imagined* consequence of a changed sense of history, namely, the possibility of an eschatological destruction of the world.<sup>38</sup> In another vein, Hans Blumenberg criticized Schmitt's theory of secularization, arguing that it did not allow for the rearrangement of theological concepts but instead arrested them in such a way that they were always unchanging. In Blumenberg's view, while modernity is indebted to its theological roots, it does not require transcendental norms for its self-assertion.<sup>39</sup> As the discussion above about the porosity of the sacred and secular alludes, this study opposes itself to this view on the basis that it implicitly assumes modernity's superiority, which is itself an ideological construal.<sup>40</sup>

On more explicitly theological grounds, a number of theologians inspired in large part by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, as well as the developing Latin American liberation theologies, responded to Schmitt's 'old' political theology by arguing for a 'new' political theology.<sup>41</sup> These thinkers, including Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Sölle,

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*Letters and Reflections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Taubes defends a radically 'negative political theology' where the future may not be appropriated by worldly power. See Marin Tepstra and Theo de Wit, "'No Spiritual Investment in the World as it is.' Jacob Taubes' Negative Political Theology," in Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (eds.) *Flight of the Gods. Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Political Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press), pp. 320-353. Löwith also directly engages Schmitt in an early essay, where he argued that after the First World War, the decline of modern philosophies of history, and therefore the loss of criteria for truth or action, led Schmitt to defend the sovereign decision as the only means with which to respond to the 'actual' (*faktische*) situation. See Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt" in Karl Löwith, Richard Wolin (ed.) and Gary Steiner (trans.), *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin's cynical view seems to have been, in a way, affirmed by Schmitt, when he later drew on the New Testament figure of the *katechon* who acts with decisiveness in order to stave off the end of history. But their differences, nonetheless, remained stark. Benjamin believed that Schmitt's assertion of the sovereign was an imaginative act in the midst of radical contingency, and that the justification for decisiveness based on a political theology of omnipotent sovereignty, is a symptom of nostalgia for a concept of political theology that longer exists. See Walter Benjamin, John Osborne (trans.) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2003), pg. 66, and Carl Schmitt, G. L. Ulman (trans.) *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (New York: Telos, 2006). Benjamin's approach to political-theological questions through the aesthetics of Baroque drama, bears similarities also with Ernst Kantorowicz's study in *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1957] 2016). There, the aesthetic production of images, specifically the *image* of the king's body, which harbors both the corporeal body and the mystical unity of the polity together, illustrates how, according to Thiem, "the unity and imperishable continuity of sovereignty are supported and enabled by the theological production of images that allow for the mediation of transience and persistence." See Thiem, "Schmittian Shadows," pg. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Blumenberg, Robert M. Wallace (trans.) *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1966] 1985). Following Blumenberg, Victoria Kahn has recently argued that current debates about political theology are indeed about the 'legitimacy of the modern project of self-assertion.' See Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> See Kathleen Davis' critique in *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 85-87.

<sup>41</sup> For the distinction between 'old' and 'new' political theology, although this is not a precise demarcation, see the important volume Francis Schlüssler Fiorenza, Klaus Tanner and Michael Welker (eds.), *Political Theology:*



Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, were united with Schmitt only in their criticism of liberalism. They thought that the critique of liberalism did not require a reassertion of decisive action, as Schmitt thought, but rather should issue from the inherently emancipatory potential of theology itself. Under liberalism, theology and religion were confined to the private, and this, the new political theologians argued, was a betrayal of its mission to challenge structural systems of injustice, colonialism, racism and sexism. Drawing much from the work of Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, they argued against apathy in light of the ethical and political implications of a Christian understanding of time.<sup>42</sup> For example, the 'dangerous memory' as Metz put it, of past and present suffering admonishes us to strive for an emancipation for those disregarded by history.<sup>43</sup> Despite their overtly Marxist orientations they encouraged mostly social-democratic styles of government. Moreover, their emphasis on those marginalized by society inspired a second wave of political theologies constructed in close proximity to critical theory, including, among others, feminist theology, black theologies, and queer theology.

While the second half of the twentieth century saw debates about Schmitt's political theology largely confined to theologians, sociologists and historians, the latter part, as well as the beginning of the twenty-first century, has seen a resurgence of interest from the quarters of political theory. This includes many of the names already mentioned above (Žižek, Badiou, Agamben) and other leading luminaries: Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau and Claude Lefort. Much of this interest, again, has to do with the crisis of liberalism, its more aggressive neoliberal iterations, the new public visibility of religion, and consequently, the continued and still unresolved ambiguity between theological concepts and what constitutes democratic political legitimacy.<sup>44</sup>

As this brief reception history illustrates, Schmitt's enduring significance and wide-ranging impact on twentieth-century thought, with respect to his critique of liberalism, his formulation of political theology, and concept of sovereignty, make him an important point of reference

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*Contemporary challenges and future directions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). The volume includes contributions from the editors as well as Moltmann, Metz and Michael Welker.

<sup>42</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, [1967] 1975).

<sup>43</sup> For Metz, this dangerous memory is tied to the particular memory of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and it is the Church which "acts as the public memory of the freedom of Jesus in the systems of our emancipative society." See Johann Baptist Metz, D. Smith (trans.) *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pg. 91.

<sup>44</sup> A brief look at the varying contributions in the prodigious volume edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, illustrates just how wide and contested political theology remains in the twenty-first century. See Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.) *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham, 2006).

for the present study. In particular, it is Schmitt's thesis of the theological origins of political sovereignty which motivates many of the later themes in Derrida's (and therefore Caputo's) work – especially as they pertain to deconstructing the 'thesis of theogony' present in modern concepts.<sup>45</sup> The approach in what follows will not be to jettison political theology, but rather, insofar as Caputo is a preeminent interpreter of Derrida, the intent is to present a 'radical' reconfiguration of *theology* that might contribute toward re-thinking the concept of sovereignty, and thereby introduce a more *radical political theology*.

This phrase, 'radical political theology,' is borrowed from the title of Clayton Crockett's book, *Radical Political Theology* (2011).<sup>46</sup> Crockett's motivations are congenial to the present study, to the extent that he is also concerned with what alternatives can be thought at the breakdown of liberalism. For him, and which this study affirms, the answer is not to be sought in neoconservative forms of politics and theology, but rather in more radical forms that avoid the horrors of Marxism. This requires a political theology that is neither liberal, liberational, nor orthodox, but rather one that is inspired by a more radical philosophy of religion that directly treats political ideas. Crockett dedicates a short chapter to John Caputo and the theme of sovereignty and weakness, and argues that Caputo along with Derrida and Catherine Keller, offer resources in the direction of a radical political theology which conceives a non-sovereign God.<sup>47</sup> His book is limited, however, only by the sheer breadth of its undertaking, enlisting a litany of thinkers; Deleuze, Agamben, Lacan, Malabou, Nancy, Spinoza, Strauss and others. Therefore, this study wishes to use Crockett's chapter on Caputo as a springboard to take up the challenge of a more vigorous and 'close' reading of Caputo and the question of sovereignty and political theology. To put this succinctly: to arrive at a radical *political* theology the study determines the need for a radical *theology*, the resources for which, it will be argued, are to be found in the various stages and loci of the work of John D. Caputo and his radical theology of the 'event.' It should be further added here, that while Schmitt's political theology provides the *political* context for sovereignty, the various stages in Caputo's work will not necessarily be 'political' in the strict sense. This is precisely because, following Derrida who is following Schmitt, the concept of sovereignty relies on a 'thesis' of theogony, of the 'auto-positioning' of the self, and therefore implicates not only metaphysics, but also ethical subjectivity and the

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<sup>45</sup> See Michael Naas who demonstrates this in his *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). He writes, "Whether one agrees or disagrees with Schmitt's – and thus Derrida's – diagnosis of sovereignty, it is hard to contest that it is this conjunction of sovereignty and theology in Schmitt that interests Derrida." Pg. 65.

<sup>46</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Another book which is also in close proximity to Crockett and radical theological possibilities for politics is Jeffrey Robbins', *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Crockett, *Radical Political Theology*, pp. 43-59.

‘exceptional’ discourse of theology or religion more generally. Indeed, because of the lack of an overt political character, Caputo’s thought is almost exclusively considered in philosophical and theological debates and is very rarely taken up with respect to politics. A part of this study’s novelty, then, will be in trying to read Caputo’s work with these more explicitly political questions in the background.<sup>48</sup>

## II. Of the Event

If political theology and the concept of sovereignty remain enduring sites for reflection in the context of global political and economic challenges, then the task is to continue to think *with* these categories in the imagining and creation of new possibilities. One of the key assumptions here will be that in order to develop these new possibilities in the mode of a more radical political theology, we will need a more *radical* theology. The quest for a *radical* theology is not to undermine the valuable contributions of other theological projects. For example, the tradition of political and liberation theologies mentioned above has undoubtedly proved vital for challenging canonical forms of theology which have predominantly been skewed in favor of Western contexts. Moreover, these traditions of theological reflection have also presented valuable accounts of God’s sovereignty in the context of political oppression. In South Africa, this was especially important in the midst of the intra-church struggle to theologically justify the *rejection* of apartheid.<sup>49</sup> While the ideology of apartheid is formally in the past, the different peoples of South Africa continue to grapple with its ongoing legacy (as the example of the student protests illustrates) and thus the sovereignty of God remains an active theological concept with respect to democracy. In this regard, theological reflection on God’s sovereignty in South Africa can be said to have its roots in the ‘new’ political theology mentioned above, where it is understood as a prophetic or liberative metaphor that ‘resists power.’<sup>50</sup> In this line the Reformed theologian John de Gruchy comments:

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<sup>48</sup> Besides Crockett and Robbins, who as we have noted make only brief allusions to Caputo’s work for its political potentials, this author is aware of only one other book-length study that considers Caputo in a more political register. See Katherine Sarah Moody’s, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>49</sup> See John de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A theology for a just world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and John de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> See Dirkie Smit, “For Allan Boesak: Resisting ‘Lordless Powers’” in Robert Vosloo (ed.) *Remembering Theologians – Doing Theology: Collected essays Dirkie Smit*, vol. 5 (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2013), pp. 77-95. See also Prince Dibeela, Puleng Lenka-Bula and Vuyani Vellem (eds.) *Prophet from the South: Essays in honour of Allan Aubrey Boesak* (Stellenbosch: SUN Media, 2014) and Tanya van Wyk, “Political Theology as critical theology” in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71. 3 (Aug, 2015), pp. 1-8. Accessed at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.3026>.



Sovereignty is not only a royal metaphor which separated God from the world, thereby legitimising hierarchy and paving the way for a theocratic-style tyranny; it is also a prophetic metaphor which, when applied to God, de-absolutizes and relativizes all other claimants to absolute power...Thus, whatever the inadequacy of sovereignty as a divine attribute we dare not surrender the theological claim that is being made.<sup>51</sup>

De Gruchy continues by arguing that the sovereignty of God should be understood with respect to the doctrine of the trinity, since it is here that sovereignty can be the basis of both a “critique of authoritarian regimes, while at the same time providing theological grounds for the democratic social order.”<sup>52</sup> Given the importance of ‘the future’ (or the ‘to come’ as Derrida calls it) for radical theology, this study would affirm theological approaches which emphasize prophetic and liberative potentials of God’s sovereignty, insofar as they also stress the always contingent element of worldly government and, therefore, the structural possibility of transformation toward a more *just* democratic society.<sup>53</sup> However, because radical theology emerges out of a distinctly postmodern discourse, it departs from this mode of theology for philosophical reasons related to the metaphysical claims implied in Trinitarian doctrine. While an investigation into the continuities and discontinuities between prophetic/liberation theology and radical theology exceeds the scope of this study, it may very well be a site for further reflection given the relative silence in Caputo’s corpus regarding the rich aspects of Trinitarian theology.<sup>54</sup>

To call upon a radical theology requires as a few further distinctions with other theological projects who go under the name ‘radical.’ Most recently, the theologian and philosopher of

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<sup>51</sup> De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, pp. 257-258, quoted in Robert Vosloo, “‘Democracy is coming to the RSA’: On democracy, theology, and futural history” in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37. 1 (May, 2016), pg. 6. Accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i1.1523>.

<sup>52</sup> De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy*, pg. 258.

<sup>53</sup> See Robert Vosloo, “‘Democracy is coming to the RSA,’” pp. 1-7, where he brings together some of the similarities between Derrida and de Gruchy’s respective approaches to the ‘open-endedness of democracy.’

<sup>54</sup> Caputo’s aversion to Trinitarian doctrine most likely emanates from two sources: the first deriving from Caputo’s early engagements with the negative theological tradition inspired by Meister Eckhart — the medieval metaphysician turned mystic — who argued that even to speak of God as a trinity based on revelation is too metaphysical. The second source comes from Derrida’s critical reading in *Glas* (1974) of the exclusive (Christian) Trinitarian structure of Hegel’s dialect. With respect to the former, Caputo writes “he [Eckhart] even rejects the adequacy of speaking of God in terms of the Trinity of persons, for whatever one can say of God even if one says it on the basis of divine revelation cannot be God.” See John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pg. xviii. With respect to Derrida’s reading of Hegel with which Caputo is in agreement, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 237-243.

religion, Ingolf Dalferth, has laid out his own systematic account of *Radical Theology* (2016).<sup>55</sup> Dalferth defines his project explicitly from the starting point of faith: “Radical theology,” he writes, “not only addresses everything in the light of the presence of God, but it does so within a certain horizon and from a very specific point of view, that of the radical reorientation from nonfaith or unfaith (unbelief) to faith (belief).”<sup>56</sup> He later contrasts Caputo’s position, whom he reads as ‘celebrating negative theology,’ and ‘as a mystical deepening...of a secular perspective,’ with his own radical theology that is “a radical shift in *theological* perspective.”<sup>57</sup> For Caputo, radical theology does not have this starting point and cannot begin from a ‘theological perspective,’ but rather ‘begins’ from the radical hermeneutic perspective that we are always inextricably inserted into the flux of life. Given the influence of Martin Heidegger on Dalferth’s *Radical Theology*, he would not deny this, but for him this flux is to be interpreted *coram deo*,<sup>58</sup> while for Caputo, the flux is what gives rise to faith (faith *without* faith), not before God, but before ‘I know not what.’

A second form of radical theology and one that Caputo has engaged with in a number of places is that of Radical Orthodoxy, often associated with the figure of John Milbank and ‘originating’ in his bold study, *Theology and Social Theory* (1990).<sup>59</sup> This movement has its parallels with Caputo but only to the extent that they both agree that modernity cannot be based on autonomous secular reason, and therefore that to be postmodern is also to be post-secular. Caputo, however, avoids the use of the ‘post-secular’ to speak of his own work, precisely because he believes it has been taken up by Radical Orthodoxy in a reactionary gesture.<sup>60</sup> While adopting postmodern insights and employing an incisive and rigorous theoretical critique of liberalism and capitalism, the ‘radicality’ of Radical Orthodoxy is, nonetheless, in stark contrast to Caputo’s sense of radical theology. For the thinkers of Radical Orthodoxy, the remedy for secular modernity is a distinctly Christian vision that is inspired by a neo-

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<sup>55</sup> Ingolf Dalferth, *Radical Theology: An Essay on Faith and Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> Dalferth, *Radical Theology*, pg. xiii.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pg. 175. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pg. xvii.

<sup>59</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (London: Blackwell, 1990), and John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.) *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). Strictly, as Ward and others have noted, Radical Orthodoxy did not originate with Milbank’s work, since there were already critiques of theological liberalism evident in other British theologians including Rowan Williams and Donald MacKinnon as well as the Yale School inspired by Stanley Hauerwas. See Graham Ward, “On Being Radical and Hopefully Orthodox” in Darren C. Marks (ed.) *Shaping a Global Theological Mind* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pg. 183.

<sup>60</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp. 60-61. Caputo’s main concern is Radical Orthodoxy’s caricature that Derrida is a nihilist. See Caputo’s engagement with Graham Ward in “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy” in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 291-317.

traditional Augustinianism and an analogical re-appropriation of Thomistic metaphysics.<sup>61</sup> For Caputo, such a vision of pre-modernity is not only fantastical but also incredibly exclusive and fails the test of *passing through* the modern to the postmodern. We do not need a pre-Enlightenment, but a post-Enlightenment, or what Derrida calls ‘nouvelles Lumières’ – a new Enlightenment.<sup>62</sup>

After these delimitations, we can now account for the second axis of this study, namely, John D. Caputo’s ‘radical theology of the event.’<sup>63</sup> Chapters three, four, five and six, will pursue a detailed reading and examination of his thought and theology, so it will be necessary to make only a few preliminary remarks for this introduction.<sup>64</sup> Parallel to the questions being raised over secularism and religion in the latter part of the twentieth century, there emerged at the same time new developments in continental philosophy: the so-called postmodern ‘turn to religion’ as well as radical *death of God* theology in the United States. Although they overlap significantly, the former was largely indebted to the tradition of Martin Heidegger and subsequent French phenomenology, hermeneutics and deconstruction, expressed in thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida, and was followed by a second generation of philosophers, including Jean-Luc Marion, Richard Kearney, Merold Westphal and John D. Caputo. Death of God theology was initially more inspired by Kant, Hegel and a certain reading of Paul Tillich, occupying thinkers in the 1960s such as Thomas J.J. Altizer, William Hamilton and Richard Rubenstein. A second wave of predominantly American theologians followed by integrating Derridian deconstruction, and was associated with Mark C. Taylor, Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist and Edith Wyschogrod. Broadly aligned with

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<sup>61</sup> For example, John Milbank, argued in *Theology and Social Theory* that the secular has taken on a pseudo-theological form since it relies on the theological categories that gave birth to it in the first place. Contrary to the dominant narrative, according to Milbank, the process of secularization begins not with the Enlightenment or the Reformation, but goes back to the medieval theologian John Duns Scotus and his notion of the ‘univocity of being.’ This moment was the turning point in the destiny of the West, according to Milbank, for it is with this notion – where God and creation occupy the same space that differs only by degree – that what follows is a kind of proto-modernity, the fruits of which are born in secularism. For an introduction to Milbank’s work and Radical Orthodoxy see James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf (trans.) *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge [1994] 2006), pg. 113.

<sup>63</sup> For a concise introduction to Caputo’s life, thought, and relationship to the wider field of ‘radical theology’ see Katherine Sarah Moody, “John D. Caputo” in Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 95-116.

<sup>64</sup> Caputo grew up in Pennsylvania in the Catholicism of pre-Vatican II. He became a member of a Catholic religious order after high-school, the Da LeSalle Brothers of the Christian Schools, where he spent three years in formation. He then left the order in 1962 to pursue philosophy and obtained his doctorate from Bryan Mawr College in 1968, with a thesis on Martin Heidegger. He taught at Villanova University for 36 years, later taking up the David R. Cook chair in philosophy in 1993. He retired early in 2004 and became the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion at Syracuse University in New York retiring in 2011. For his dissertation see John D. Caputo, *The Way back into the ground: An interpretation of the path of Heidegger’s Thought* (PhD diss., Bryan Mawr College, 1968).

postmodern thinking, both emphases followed Nietzsche and Heidegger in the pronouncement of the death of the God of onto-theology, although they would differ in their responses to the possibility of thinking theology or God *after* the death of God.<sup>65</sup>

John Caputo's approach to theology follows this initial Heideggerian delimitation of metaphysical theology (chapter three). In his early encounters with Heidegger and Meister Eckhart, Caputo remains deeply concerned with the possibilities that can still be thought after exposing the limitations of neo-Thomism. At a certain point in the 1980s, however, Caputo encountered a number of historical and philosophical criticisms of Heidegger, as well as the exciting philosophy coming out of France (Levinas, Lyotard and Derrida). In his first major work that propelled him internationally, *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987), Caputo wanted to push the limits of hermeneutics and 'write philosophy from the edge' by maintaining the 'original difficulty of life.'<sup>66</sup> In this philosophical exploration, Caputo begins to depart from Heidegger and draws nearer to Derrida as the philosopher who most radically expresses an openness and affirmation of this 'factual' difficulty of life. As Caputo increasingly engaged Derrida, he made the startling claim in his hugely influential book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), that deconstruction *itself* is structured 'like a religion,' but a 'religion *without* religion.' A crucial aspect of this 'religion' is the 'event,' which is like the coming Messiah that never actually arrives. Caputo claims that this reading of religion is a generalizable religious experience and, therefore, it describes a faith that is not only open to the faithless, but is also *more* faithful than traditional confessional religion because it can never be totally sure to whom, or in what, it places its faith (chapter four).<sup>67</sup>

Caputo's meticulous reading of Derrida proved profound for scholars of religion and theology. Critics had dismissed Derrida as a postmodern nihilist, playing endless games with words and chains of linguistic signifiers. In this detached realm of linguistic idealism, it seemed inconceivable that deconstruction had any ethical or political import, let alone the possibility that 'God' could be thought of in any rigorous way. But Caputo's reading among others,<sup>68</sup> changed this perception. Caputo then went further, claiming not only that

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<sup>65</sup> For a comprehensive historical introduction as well as a sampling of the major contributors to 'Radical Theology' see the recently published magisterial volume, *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (2018).

<sup>66</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 1-3.

<sup>67</sup> The 'radicality' of this religious experience lies in the fact that it's root (*radix*) is not a common root. What is 'common' or 'generalizable' is the recognition of the universality of multiple singularities. See John D. Caputo, *Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), pg. 70.

<sup>68</sup> See the important work of Simon Critchley in this regard, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

deconstruction is structured like a 'certain' religion without religion, both ethically and politically conscious, but also that theology itself could be read deconstructively (chapter five). Caputo subsequently developed a 'theology of the event,' where the event is that which is 'going on *in* the name of God.' God is not a thing, an omnipotent sovereign Being, or even in the tradition of negative theology, the hyper-being we cannot name. Rather, God is structured like an event that may or may not occur on the horizon of possibility. Instead of a *theo-logy* as the discourse on the *logos* of God, he develops a *theo-poetics* which attends to the 'events' that are going on in the name of God and in the Scriptures. This 'weak' or 'radical' theology dramatically challenges God's sovereignty in the conventional sense. In a theology of the event we do not know when or how the event will come, whether it will be a stranger or an enemy who knocks on the door looking for shelter. But like the coming of the Other, God is something that we pray for even while God is praying/calling on us to answer. The idea of the sovereign God that gets re-imagined in a theology *without* theology is a God or sovereign *without* sovereignty. Crucially, this 'without' (*sans*) does not mean radical negation or logical contradiction; the sovereign is not traditionally sovereign but it nonetheless exerts a force. This force is not a strong 'decisive' force like the one described by Schmitt which must enact a decision, but is rather a 'weak force' more like a call or prayer.

The 'weak theology' which Caputo develops in *Weakness of God* (2006) is later recast in *The Insistence of God* (2013). As will be argued in chapter six, the transition that occurs between these two works leads Caputo to refer to his theology more as 'radical' than as 'weak.' It is for this reason that the study has adopted for its title 'radical theology' instead of 'weak theology.' Under both descriptions, Caputo develops a discourse on theopoetics as an exemplary discourse of a theology of the event. In 'radical theology' as opposed to a 'weak theology,' theopoetics undergoes a 'materialist turn,' which is partially a response to Caputo's critics and partially a rekindling of his relationship with Hegel and the more 'radical death of God' theologies mentioned above. It will be at this point where the real 'force' of Caputo's 'radical theo-political-poetic' contribution is felt. Having traced sovereignty initially in a political context with respect to Carl Schmitt, and then following its deconstructed iterations throughout the loci of Caputo's thought, the study comes to the conclusion that in order to inaugurate a radical political theology it will be ineffectual to speak of the distinction between 'sovereignty *and* the event,' as the title suggests. This construction implies that the one is working *on* the other, and misses the deconstructive point that such a binary relation 'auto-deconstructs.' The preferred locution, *the event of sovereignty*, will be suggested to deliberately provoke the use of the double genitive: the event *of* sovereignty as the immanent possibility of

its force, and *the event* of sovereignty as the impossible possibility of its coming. This ‘event of sovereignty’ receives its theoretical force in the later work of Jacques Derrida, particularly in his discussions of law, justice, and a democracy ‘to come.’ Not only do these themes figure prominently in Caputo’s articulation of radical theology and therefore require their own attention, but they have also been criticized by other philosophies of event. The stakes involved in Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ or what we are calling an ‘event of sovereignty’ is the relation between the ‘to come’ and ‘the present,’ arguably the enduring controversy of deconstruction. Caputo’s ‘re-casted theopoetics’ of radical theology it will be argued, assists in resolving this tension and allows one to comprehend a fully radical account of theopoetics that neither devolves into empiricism nor succumbs to the temptation of idealism. Caputo’s radical political theology, therefore, will be said to offer the discursive theological resources (theopoetics) that might articulate an original approach to sovereignty that harbors transformative potentials for more radically orientated modes of democratic politics. While the study does not investigate the nature of such radical-political modes, it does conclude by gesturing toward theopoetics as a discursive ‘practice’ that might be fostered *within* religious or non-religious communities.

## II. Problem Statement, Question, Thesis, Method

This study will investigate the contemporary theological-political concept of sovereignty. It follows Jacques Derrida in the claim that this concept has its origins in a ‘thesis of theogony’ implicit in modern thinking, and which thus implicates not only political conceptions of authority, but also ethics and religion. The study attempts to interrogate this ‘theologeme’ through a detailed analysis of the work of John D. Caputo. Caputo’s influential religious and theological interpretation of Derrida claims not only to expose the limitations of sovereign thinking, ethical action, (Christian) theology, and ultimately the sovereignty of God, but also proposes a way to think beyond these limitations via the resources of a radical theology of the event. A radical theology of the event, therefore, may become the discourse with which to imagine a *radical political theology* which does not see the event as a way to jettison sovereignty, but rather considers sovereignty as an event itself — *the event of sovereignty*. Such an approach to sovereignty is offered as a novel theological alternative to the challenges surrounding the theological foundations of sovereignty and therefore of democracy.



The research question for this study is how do the intellectual resources offered by Caputo's 'radical theology of event' aid in re-conceiving the concept of sovereignty, and thus to what extent do they contribute toward thinking the possibility of a radical *political* theology?

The secondary questions that this study will pursue include:

- What is the nature of sovereignty conceived in the tradition of political theology with particular reference to Carl Schmitt?
- How is this question of sovereignty reflected upon in the trajectory and development of John D. Caputo's thought?
- How does Caputo conceive a religious reading of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction?
- To what extent is this religious reading an effective strategy to 're-think' the concept of sovereignty, and therefore a radical political theology?

The thesis of this study is that Caputo's 'theopoetics' of radical theology becomes the discursive form which harbors the resources of a *radical political theology*, and thus 'prepares' the possibility to imagine a poetic-revolution of sovereignty — which is a god to come, a master without mastery, or a god without sovereignty. The novelty of this thesis lies in its contribution to the ongoing discussions and debates into the role of Caputo's radical theology in the Christian imaginary more broadly, and in particular, to this radical theology's effectiveness as a theoretical contribution to the *political* challenges of our time.

To talk of a methodology in a study that espouses a deconstructive reading of texts is admittedly a difficult task, since it is precisely the *resistance* to the strictures of a method 'to be applied,' which forms part of what distinctly characterizes radical theology. Nonetheless, there are some preliminary features that can be identified. For example, the study can be said to proceed via a critical and qualitative set of readings of relevant literature pertaining to sovereignty, political theology and deconstruction, closely analyzing and placing them in critical-analytic tension with one another. It may also be conceived as a project in 'philosophical theology,' insofar as it makes use of a philosophical approach to analyze theological concepts. In this case, the philosophical approach of Derridian deconstruction, as it presents itself in the thought of John D. Caputo, will be used to analyze the political-theological concept of sovereignty. Stated in this way, however, a philosophically and theologically informed study that names its 'object' as also the source for its methodology, indeed, seems to suggest a chicken-and-egg-problem. Without seeing this problem as

necessarily a limitation, Graham Ward states, “the approach has to emerge through the theological emphases that create the organic coherence of the relationships of one topic with the others.”<sup>69</sup> Without this integrity of coherence, he continues, “the approach, or method, is ‘outside’ the system.”<sup>70</sup> For Ward, there can be no ‘outside’ the system because everything is *in* the system (Truth or God).<sup>71</sup> While this study does not have the kind of metaphysical framework that interests Ward, there is, nonetheless, a number of points of contact with what he has recently developed as an ‘engaged systematic’ methodology. Following Ward, then, we note three features that describe this study as a project in ‘engaged systematics.’

In a first sense, the approach here can be seen as a ‘corrective’ to the ‘adversarial’ nature of much confessional theology which sees Christian doctrine as an end in itself. Under such an understanding, the conceptual content of theological reflection is elevated at the expense of the “way Christian life is lived” (*lived* doctrine).<sup>72</sup> An engaged systematic approach, on the other hand, refuses the binary distinctions this implies between faith/reason, transcendence/immanence or philosophy/theology, because it recognizes that cognitive thinking or theological reflection is always-already embodied in the practices of everyday life.<sup>73</sup> Thus, we can say that in this study’s creative participation in both the fields of philosophy and theology it endeavors to remain always open-ended to its other. It is neither just philosophical nor theological, but operates on the borders *between* the two.<sup>74</sup>

Secondly, and following from this first sense is that an engaged systematics seeks to understand or take cognizance of the *context* in which beliefs are formed and communicated.<sup>75</sup> Christianity, the Church, and its theological language for example, are always involved in deeply interconnected networks of social relations and discursive practices. These

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<sup>69</sup> Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 115.

<sup>71</sup> “[S]ince we are talking Truth here (and God) then nothing can be outside the system.” *Ibid.* Ward’s statement here that ‘nothing can be outside the system,’ could easily be read as the theological version of Derrida’s memorable line from *Of Grammatology*, “There is nothing outside of the text” (*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*). Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak (trans.) *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pg. 158. See Caputo’s commentary in John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 79-80.

<sup>72</sup> Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, pg. 119.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 119-120.

<sup>74</sup> See John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), where he writes: “The distinction between philosophy and theology is not what we thought it was all along; it is not what has been classically described as the distinction between faith and reason, where reason sees and faith does not quite see. Rather, *the distinction between philosophy and theology is drawn between two kinds of faith*, by which I mean two kinds of ‘seeing as,’” pg. 78. Original emphasis. By ‘seeing-as’ Caputo is making the Heideggerian hermeneutical point that we cannot escape the circle of interpretation. Seeing-as strengthens theology if faith is understood as ‘seeing through a glass darkly,’ and weakens philosophy if reason is understood as pure-seeing. *Ibid.*, pg. 77.

<sup>75</sup> Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, pp. 131-135.



‘variegated’ networks, and the series of interactions that they mediate have an effect on the way in which social, ecclesial and political life are organized. What this means for the language of Christian theology is that it is always to be understood as a process of creative circulation and deployment across languages, cultures, and other particular contexts. While this suggests an enterprise that is not static but always fluid and constantly changing, it does not simply reject the historical traditions from which it remains in continuity. To this extent, as a study which seeks novel ways in which to (re)deploy theological discourse (i.e. the theopoetics of radical theology), it can fully concur with Ward’s point that an engaged systematics “augments, even as it translates and recites these continuities, so that the imaginative dynamic of the tradition moves toward new appropriations and integrations of present experience with the past as it points continually, eschatologically, towards the future.”<sup>76</sup>

Thirdly, while this study will no doubt make philosophical and theological claims that are propositional in nature, it does not intend to dogmatically police these claims in the service of what Ward calls a ‘functionalist approach to doctrine’ (or philosophical thinking). Rather, as an exercise in engaged systematics, this study acknowledges an epistemology that will never grasp the certainty of the truth that it seeks. Since cognition is embodied, “there can be no hard and fast distinction, from the human point of view, between revealed and natural theology.”<sup>77</sup> An epistemological approach that limits or questions the distinction between philosophical (natural) and theological (revealed) reflection, further impacts the way in which we ‘speak, name and imagine’ both personally and collectively. These changes to speech, naming and imagination, which this epistemology engenders, should not be seen as limitations but as potentials or ‘promises’ for the capacity for change. An epistemology of an ‘engaged systematic’ theology, therefore, is not simply about placing limits on what we can know but precisely about the imaginative effects it is able to generate and that have the ability to “change the way we act.” Such an approach, Ward says, “will issue into, foster and ferment ethical life.”<sup>78</sup> This epistemological posture is what the present study wishes to embrace, not

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pg. 130. We can hear in this emphasis on continuity and eschatological futurity, a congruence with what Derrida called the ‘l’avenir’ (the to come) which is to be distinguished from ‘le futur.’ While the latter refers to the predictability of the future, the former is Derrida’s attempt to think an event that is unforeseeable and which might interrupt and transform the present. However, ‘l’avenir’ has often been misconstrued as placing too much emphasis on the ‘future’ without concern for the past. Following Samir Haddad’s corrective comments on the sense of ‘historicity’ in Derrida’s thinking of the ‘democracy to come,’ Robert Vosloo accurately describes what he calls Derrida’s ‘futural historicity’ as “a historicity that emphasizes an inheritance from the past and a repetition (which is always a reappropriation of the tradition) in the present.” See Vosloo, “‘Democracy is coming to the RSA,’ pg. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, pg. 136.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

only because it is sensible methodological practice, but more importantly because it is constitutive of the generative theological effects the study seeks to cultivate in service of ethical, communal and political life.

### III. Chapter Outlines

Chapter two expands on the first axis of this study by turning to Carl Schmitt, who is understood as the central reference point for contemporary continental philosophical and political thought with respect to sovereignty. It undertakes to expose the metaphysical nature of Schmitt's political theology and use of the concept of sovereignty. The chapter begins with some preliminary remarks on the difficulties of approaching the concept of sovereignty and recommends a deconstructive hermeneutic which exposes its transcendental conditions. It then offers a diagnosis of the current 'crisis of liberal democracy,' in order to indicate the vacuum created by democracy's tensions. Through historical analysis and illustrative examples, the chapter follows Graham Ward's account of the fluctuations between micro-political and macro-political trends in the twentieth century, culminating in today's 'postdemocratic condition.' The latter describes the 'crisis' referred to above, which is given specificity by the constitutive lack of democratic representation and a corresponding 'depoliticization,' both of which are made manifest in the increasing authoritarianism of the neo-liberal democratic consensus. The crisis of democracy is thus a crisis of sovereignty. Out of this context, the trenchant critique of liberal parliamentarianism conducted by Schmitt shows its relevancy. The chapter then formally examines Schmitt's political theology and his concept of sovereignty, which are positioned as a direct challenge to the depoliticizing nature of liberal democracy. To interpret Schmitt's sovereign 'political decision' – the extra-legal and thus transcendent possibility to break political deadlock – the chapter argues that his theological analogue for the sovereign is justified by nostalgia for order, and rendered plausible by a Christian eschatology designed to promote what is called a 'politics of presence.' This is argued by examining Schmitt's use of the notion of the *katechon* or 'the restrainer.' This examination, which exposes the transcendental theological conditions of sovereignty in the political theological tradition of Carl Schmitt, serves as a reference point for the nature of sovereignty in the study. The chapter, therefore, concludes by gesturing toward a 'radical hermeneutical approach' to be taken toward the concept of sovereignty, which will be adopted in the remaining chapters, albeit under different significations: metaphysics, ethical subjectivity, religion and God.

Chapter three takes up the ‘politics of presence’ implied by Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty into the idiom of metaphysical thought, or ‘metaphysics of presence,’ famously discussed by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. The chapter begins the analysis of Caputo in his early work on Heidegger, since it is here that he develops his deep resistance to metaphysical thinking. However, in as much as this will illuminate Caputo’s early philosophical allegiances, the chapter also attempts to go beyond the simple historical task of tracing a thinker’s development. In Caputo’s case, the developments in his thought are not opaque, but involve conscious moves which are fundamental for understanding certain embraces as well as certain hesitations that emerge in his later theological writing. The chapter demonstrates Caputo’s critique of metaphysics following Heidegger’s confrontation with the Neo-Scholastic tradition of Catholic theology. It treats Caputo’s delimitation of Thomistic metaphysics as the ‘first gesture’ in ‘overcoming metaphysics.’ In an important second gesture, which Caputo learns from Heidegger, he attempts to re-read Thomism through the ‘mystical element’ in Heidegger’s thought, namely Meister Eckhart. Importantly, it is this ‘double-gesture’ the chapter claims, which allows Caputo to affect a delimitation and re-reading of Heidegger himself. The latter is argued by way of what is called a ‘rhythmic impetus’ generated by the Heideggerian impulse to remain in fidelity to the ‘matter to be thought’ (*Sache des Denkens*). The chapter concludes by demonstrating how this impetus culminates in Caputo’s critical reappraisal of Heidegger and the largely ethical reasons for his *Kehre* to Jacques Derrida.

Chapter four attends to what might be called Caputo’s ‘middle period.’ Here, Caputo further pursues the ethical dimension of his philosophy opened up by French continental philosophy, and then later re-frames it in terms of the religious dimension of deconstruction. In order to delineate Caputo’s approach to ethics and religion, the chapter pursues the deconstructive *il*/logic of the *sans* or the ‘without.’ This *il*/logic is to be understood not as a-logical (as in *p* is *-p*) but rather as the ‘positive’ consequence of the contingency of all logic. This ‘positive’, ethical, religious, or even political reading of deconstruction is central to Caputo’s reading of Derrida. The chapter follows its deployment in Caputo’s discussion of ethics (*sans* ethics) and Derrida’s religion (*sans* religion). The *il*/logic of the *sans* is a thinking of the ‘event,’ and thus, we see Caputo’s project emerging in a no simple confrontation with sovereignty (as ethical subjectivity, or monological religion), but as movement *beyond* both ethics and religion. At this point, we will have begun to engage the second axis of this study. The chapter begins by attending to some key historical moments in the developments leading up to postmodern

thought, as well as for the sake of conceptual clarity, provides a short description of Derrida's notion of *différance*. Next, in an examination of Caputo's *Against Ethics*, it traces a series of distinctions (i.e. heteronomism-heteromorphism) which Caputo deploys in service of a 'poetics of obligation' in contradistinction to the modern conception of autonomous (sovereign) subjectivity. Caputo's reading of ethics, however, presents some limitations insofar as it rhetorically collapses the distinction between *différance* and the Nietzschean tragic. The chapter suggests that Caputo's auto-correction occurs only when ethics is understood within the purview of his religious reading of deconstruction. It concludes by beginning to address the latter through the il/logic of negative theology's 'wounded language.' This final investigation into the apophatic leads to the radical delimitation of (sovereign Christian) Religion.

Chapter five follows through with Caputo's religious reading of deconstruction in his career defining book *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997). It examines three central religious motifs that constitute Derrida's 'religion'; the messianic, the apocalyptic and the gift. In each of these themes Caputo rehearses the animating gestures of a religion without religion; consistently resisting the nihilistic charge levelled against deconstruction and reemphasizing the *experience* of the event (messianic, apocalyptic, gift) as the *quasi*-transcendental possibility *for* faith. This experience is simultaneously the overcoming of determinate (confessional) religion, as well as an ethical-political, and therefore religious call to responsibility for the Other, which crucially lays its claim on us without force. On the basis of this affirmative reading of Derridian deconstruction, Caputo then attempts nothing less than an invasion of theology with a more radical 'weak' theology, 'coming out as a theologian' according to Catherine Keller. Following his rendering of the *religious* experience given in deconstruction, Caputo now introduces a '*theopoetic*' experience given by the event in the name of God. The second half of the chapter sets out this 'weak' theology by illustrating the dynamics of the 'Name-Event' *quasi*-structure. It then clarifies and distinguishes Caputo's position with reference to the so-called radical *death of God* theologies in the tradition of Hegel, including two brief encounters with J.J. Altizer and Mark C. Taylor. The chapter concludes by unambiguously stating how God's sovereignty is deconstructed by radical theology. This deconstruction does not deny sovereignty, but redistributes it as an unconditional claim *without* force, and thus relocating the order of *theo*-logy to the order of the event, or the order of *theo-poetics*.

The concluding chapter of the study seeks to bring the two axes, 'sovereignty' and 'event,' into productive and creative tension. This confluence is not a synthesizing gesture, but a deconstructive one, allowing us now to speak of *the event of sovereignty* and consequently a *radical political theology*. Given that Caputo draws much of his radical theology from Derrida's later writing, the chapter begins by clarifying Derrida's deconstruction of sovereignty vis-à-vis Carl Schmitt. This is accompanied by a reading of his important book *Politics of Friendship*, together with the "Force of Law" and *Rogues* essays. Derrida's political intervention of a sovereignty *without* sovereignty or a dream of 'a god to come,' is then placed into critical opposition with three broadly materialist approaches in continental philosophy, that of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek. These thinkers are generally dismissive of Derrida because they see his event as locked into the stasis of postmodern *différance*. Following the recent work of the theologian Jayne Svenungsson, the chapter argues that these thinkers' own alternatives are not ultimately satisfying, since their thinking of the event harbors Schmittian tendencies that betray a desire for a 'politics of presence.' Given their critique of postmodernism, the task is then to examine to what extent such critique holds water with respect to Caputo's interpretation of Derrida. To this end, the chapter traces the adaptations Caputo makes to the theopoetics of his 'weak theology' (a term he starts to use with less frequency), which it is argued, serves as an admission of a residual Kantianism imbedded in his philosophy of the event. The chapter suggests that Caputo's turn to Hegel offers a more 'visceral' or 'material' rendering of the event. Armed with this renewed theopoetics of radical theology, which circumvents vulgar materialism while at the same time avoiding idealist distance, it concludes by offering 'three pills' of a theopoetics for a *radical political theology*. These 'pills' constitute the 'resources' for a radical political theology. However, this loose thematization will need to be itself exposed to the risk of 'perhaps' lest it become a regime to be 'applied.' This argument is made in tandem with a discussion developed by Johann-Albrecht Meylahn and what he calls the 'third-way' of theopoetics. The study concludes with a reading of Derrida's reading of Paul Celan in his last seminars, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001-02). Here, it tentatively suggests that Celan's 'poetic sovereignty' or what we are calling theopoetics, is the site or discourse which thinks the event of sovereignty as a poetic revolution.

# Chapter Two

## Carl Schmitt, Sovereignty and Democracy

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*Man, he went on to say, was the measure of things. His right to recognize and to distinguish between good and evil, reality and counterfeit, was indefeasible; woe to them who dared to lead him astray in his belief in this creative right. Better for them that a millstone be hanged about their necks and that they be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

- Thomas Mann<sup>79</sup>

### I. Introduction

In Thomas Mann's beautifully stylized masterpiece and comically serious Bildungsroman, *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the protagonist, Hans Castrop, is caught between the novel's recurring dialectics: cold rationalism and ignorant passion, the enlightened and the romantic, the traditional and the reactionary, the decision and the passive, the medicinal and the sentimental. From a three-week visit, which becomes a seven-year stay, Castrop is the tragic hero of a cast of characters that inhabit a Swiss tuberculosis sanatorium in the alps, living in abstraction from the "Flatlands" below where political turmoil is about to unfold. He resembles the passive subject, swayed to and fro by the novel's tensions on the one hand, and by the possibility of his imaginative self-(re)creation on the other.

In a particular passage Castrop contemplates the nature of 'actuality and dreams' and the bottomlessness of the 'mystery of life.' The response from his rationalist interlocutor, Herr Settembrini, is to offer words of caution captured in the text quoted above. Here we see a dense but paradoxical ambiguity of informants, not only evident in the text of *The Magic Mountain* as a whole, but also within the formation of individual characters themselves. That humankind is the 'measure' to 'distinguish between good and evil' is certainly Nietzschean, contrasted with a Lockean capacity and right to do so. But even further, the religious depth

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<sup>79</sup> Thomas Mann, H.T. Lowe-Porter (trans.) *The Magic Mountain* (London: Vintage, 1999), pg. 667.



dimension of one's 'belief in this creative right' ('*Glauben an dieses schöpferische Recht*')<sup>80</sup> and the call for judgement (recalling the words of Jesus), if the right to this dimension is questioned, capitalizes and marks off this uncertain and contradictory structure.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, this situation of metaphysical contradiction and confusion was prefigured by the First World War and the ensuing political and economic ambiguities that followed.

Mann's discursive allegory serves as a reference point for the multilevel conflicts of the early twentieth century and also for the sustained debates of the Enlightenment legacy in the present day. Étienne Balibar, citing Mann, centers these disputes around the theme of *universalism*, what he calls enlightenment modernity's 'theoretical commonplaces:' progress, rationality, critical knowledge, prioritization of 'secularization' over forms of belief, the teleology of human rights and cosmopolitanism.<sup>82</sup> What has become abundantly clear, however, from sources too numerous to admit here,<sup>83</sup> is that 'Enlightenment' universalism possesses inherent contradictions that appear ultimately self-defeating, undoing the very things they wish to maintain. But as Balibar argues, we cannot dispose of universalism or its contradictions by way of principled inversion or negation. Indeed, the task is to 'tarry' within the contradiction itself 'so as to clarify its terms,' which "can happen only through continued efforts to deconstruct both the classical theoretical formulas and the apparatuses of power in which they have been invested."<sup>84</sup>

It is this setting and task which provoke the expression taken from the title of Balibar's short essay: '*Nouvelles Lumières*' or a 'New Enlightenment.' Borrowing explicitly from Jacques Derrida,<sup>85</sup> Balibar teases out the enigmatic nature of Derrida's formulation. On the one hand 'new' speaks of radical otherness or alterity, something that would sever the received and

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989), pg. 839.

<sup>81</sup> See Michael Beddow, 'The Magic Mountain,' in Ritchie Robertson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 137-150; pg. 147, for comments in this regard.

<sup>82</sup> Étienne Balibar, Vivian Folkenflik (trans.) "Postscript: The Idea of 'New Enlightenment' [*Nouvelles Lumières*] and the Contradictions of Universalism," in Graham Hammil & Julia Lupton (eds.) *Political Theology & Early Modernity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), pp. 299-304; pg. 301.

<sup>83</sup> Though we might mention Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as at least one of the major progenitors of this critical tradition. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (ed.) and Edmund Jephcott (trans.) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1944] 2002).

<sup>84</sup> Balibar, "Postscript: The Idea of New Enlightenment," pg. 303.

<sup>85</sup> Balibar cites *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2003). For the English translation see Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), specifically the second essay "The 'World' of the Enlightenment to Come (Exception, Calculation, and Sovereignty)." The essay was first read as a paper on August 27, 2002 at the opening of the twenty-ninth *Congrès de l'Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue française [ASPLF]* at the University of Nice. The idea of a 'New Enlightenment' is also an important one for John D. Caputo in his formulation of the future of the religious. He calls for a more 'enlightened Enlightenment,' see John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 60-61.

preconceived notions of ‘enlightenment.’ On the other hand, ‘new’ could be interpreted as a re-inscription onto the tradition, that is, as a ‘a renewal or return to sources.’ Finally, a ‘New Enlightenment’ might also consider the historical and philosophical contingency of the term itself, thus pointing toward the ‘contents covered’ and thus to the need to *uncover* that which is left behind or is left out. The moment of this ‘new event’ – for ‘enlightenment’ may no longer be the word one will still use in the future – is a *contested* moment, not only in terms of the move from singularity to plurality, but also in terms of the openness to the multitude of ways in which the very conception of enlightenment is approached or formulated.

It is in this hermeneutical situation that the question of secularization and therefore also the specific role of religion come into view. The dominant account, as is now well-known, is that for much of the twentieth century it was believed that the Enlightenment successfully articulated and held together the distinction between private and public religious space. With special regard to politics, theology had no role to play and was vindictively ostracized to the realm of private intellectual speculation carried out by theologians. Such a view has since been challenged as a major reduction. In this respect, two important works may be worth mentioning; Mark Lilla’s *The Stillborn God* (2007) and Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007).<sup>86</sup> While coming to very different conclusions, their hugely significant contributions have opened up the field of political theology to the probing implications of theology’s role in contemporary politics. Both give their own accounts of the necessary theological resources at play in the developments surrounding early modernity. While Taylor finds theology as an absolute necessity for providing a thicker description to our contemporary politics, Lilla on the other hand, calls for its strict regulation by the state in political discourse. To leave religion unhinged, in his view, would be to risk serious consequences for a liberal polity. It is in the wake of the penetrating implications of thinking together theology and politics with reference to the present (post)-liberal state that this chapter is situated and toward which the rest of this study is dedicated.

Here in chapter one, we bring into particular focus the first ‘axis’ of the investigation. At the outset, the word ‘sovereignty’ invokes a vast network of interrelated fields and terms – from notions of authority, power, legitimation and juridical-political jurisdiction, to the academic disciplines of political and legal theory as well as theology. To say that the concept of

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<sup>86</sup> See Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage, 2007) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).



sovereignty is contested would be a considerable understatement.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, this contestation underscores a range of differing perceptions as sites of struggle. In their introduction to a volume of essays revealingly titled *Sovereignty in Fragments* (2010), Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner remark:

If sovereignty is made to accommodate the length and breadth of political theory and practice, how could it ever be unequivocal? Pinning it down one way or another turns out to be itself a politically contestable choice. Getting rid of it, on the other hand, would amount to renouncing politics altogether.<sup>88</sup>

In a way that reaffirms the comments with respect to Balibar, Kalmo and Skinner indicate that the recent literature on sovereignty treat the topic in two general directions. On the one hand, there are those who seek to abandon the concept seeing it at best as arcane and at worst ‘protean.’<sup>89</sup> The proponents of this view would rather get ‘rid of it’ for its outdated references to absolutist forms of authority and government. Precisely given the international nature of governmentality and cross-border capital and technological information flows, the notion of sovereignty is stifling, they argue, and in fact masks ‘egoistical motives of nation-states.’<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, the very obsession with eliminating sovereignty from the political-legal vocabulary seems only to instantiate it further and illuminates its persistent character. Negation, as we have seen, is often not a remedy but only produces effects in the opposite direction. It is important not merely to reassert sovereignty in any strong sense but to articulate and define its diffusion in an ‘era of ever growing fragmentation.’<sup>91</sup> All of this is not to say that bold attempts have not been made to accommodate this ambiguity or indeed to define or account for it.<sup>92</sup> However, given the discursive and contextual nature of questions like; ‘what *is* sovereignty?’ ‘where is it to be found?’ ‘where did it come from?’ and ‘who can claim it today?’, Kalmo and Skinner can only advise for a ‘parallax’ approach, which supports

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<sup>87</sup> The scholarly literature on sovereignty is voluminous and cannot be overstated. Apart from a proliferation of articles in legal, political and sociological journals, the staggering number of monographs is also enough to bewilder. Already in 2009, Panu Minkkinen noted that in the last ten years the British Library catalogue recorded approximately 330 monographs with ‘sovereignty’ in the title. See Panu Minkkinen, *Sovereignty, Knowledge, Law* (London: Routledge, 2009), pg. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Hent Kalmo & Quentin Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present, and Future of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pg. 2.

<sup>89</sup> See Stanley Benn, “The Uses of ‘Sovereignty’,” in W. J. Stankiewicz (ed.) *In Defense of Sovereignty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pg. 85.

<sup>90</sup> Kalmo & Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 2.

<sup>92</sup> For a recent review, which tries to map some of these attempts, see Verena Erlenbusch, “The Concept of Sovereignty in Contemporary Continental Philosophy” in *Philosophy Compass* 7. 6 (2012), pp. 365-375.

their view that the chapters in their volume “as a whole seek to dispel the illusion that there is a single agreed-upon concept of sovereignty for which one could offer a clear definition.”<sup>93</sup>

This introductory proviso obliges us to take into account a deeper level of complexity invoked by the discourse of sovereignty. As this study is not purported to be a work of explicit legal or political theory, adducing this complexity will not be a matter of rehearsing empirical arguments or engaging comprehensively with what is an enormous field of literature. This is precisely what is meant when Kalmo and Skinner write, “Pinning it [sovereignty] down one way or another turns out to be itself a politically contestable choice.” Nonetheless, as Paul Kahn comments, “Sovereignty is a political concept — indeed, it is *the* political concept.”<sup>94</sup> For our purposes, we might begin by saying that sovereignty is a ‘palimpsest,’<sup>95</sup> where the concern lies with treating what presently stands on the page, not sovereignty’s history but its contemporary usage and what that entails. This contemporary usage of sovereignty will take its point of departure from the work of the political theorist, Carl Schmitt, and will be treated deconstructively throughout this study.

There are at least two further reasons for treating a discussion on sovereignty in this way. First, and far from being an original insight, the so-called postmodern moment has taught us that concepts, definitions and language are intertwined with power, authority and exclusion, contributing determinately to the construction of reality. This is to say that our modern ‘discourses’ about certain ideas operate according to a set of assumptions and rules that we are not impervious to, and that the inherent biases and prejudices they conceal lend themselves to the idea that we can truly *know* reality. The corollary of this is to say that our concepts are always already contingent to specific historical sets of assumptions about knowledge, which ultimately determine how we conceive and shape the reality of the present and the past. In the postwar context of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, following the developments in politics and the philosophies of thinkers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Bataille and others, Michel Foucault came to these and similar conclusions about the contingency of our discourse: “discursive practice,” he wrote, “is a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pg. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Paul W. Kahn, “The Question of Sovereignty” in *Stanford Journal of International Law*, 40 (2004), pg. 282. Kahn has also written an important book on sovereignty, see Paul W. Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Luke Bretherton, “Sovereignty” in Nicholas Adams, George Pattison and Graham Ward (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 255-276; pg. 256.

and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operations of the enunciative function.”<sup>96</sup>

When talking of sovereignty, then, one must take into account the transcendental conditions that make the discourse possible. Failing this methodological step produces at least two consequences: first, it reifies the history of the concept by presupposing an *essential* form. The latter then assumes it can be objectively known as a unit of analysis through a clean representation of language. With this reification and the object as a *givenness* of reality, the conceptual field becomes closed. This is the way in which analysis typically proceeds followed by competing interpretations until there is consensus. But such a closure inevitably results in conflict over these competing interpretations that make use of differing vocabularies. Some of these conceptual difficulties with respect to sovereignty were already recognized and described by Schmitt in his often-cited *Political Theology* (1922). There he comments on the problematic distinction of sovereignty between the sociological and the legal: “It would be a distortion of the schematic disjunction between sociology and jurisprudence if one were to say that the exception has no juristic significance and is therefore ‘sociology.’”<sup>97</sup> In this context Schmitt is arguing against a reading of sovereignty that would deny ‘the decision on the state of exception’ as existing within the realm of the juristic. Indeed, such a denial or refusal is symptomatic of what Schmitt conceived as the stilted neo-Kantian theories of the state which were equated with the legal order. Accordingly, sovereignty resists an either/or (purely sociological or juristic) distinction, it is “bound to the normally valid legal order *but also* transcended it.”<sup>98</sup> These neo-Kantian schemes either try to repress sovereignty altogether or treat what are considered its two constitutive elements separately, namely, internality and externality. For Schmitt, the appropriate response entails a conservative move which re-introduces transcendence into the political. This move entails the essentially ‘theo-political’ conception of sovereignty, a conception that continues the early-modern tradition from Jean Bodin and was revived by Schmitt in the twentieth century.

Secondly, and following more directly from this first consequence is the nature of sovereignty’s historicity, or lack thereof, as a concept. The Swedish political philosopher, Jens Bartelson, in his first major work on this idea, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (1995), defends the

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<sup>96</sup> Michel Foucault, Alan Sheridan Smith (trans). *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, [1969] 1972), pg. 117.

<sup>97</sup> Carl Schmitt, George Schwab (trans). *Political Theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), pg. 13. See also chapter 2 where he engages Hans Kelsen the emblematic neo-Kantian figure for Schmitt.

<sup>98</sup> See here George Schwab’s introduction, xliii-xliv. Emphasis added.

thesis that “sovereignty and knowledge implicate each other logically and produce each other historically.”<sup>99</sup> From this point of departure, through a selection of texts from three periods – ‘the Renaissance’, ‘the classic age’ and ‘modernity’ – he traces a *genealogy* of knowledge configurations. These configurations change through these periods and influence the way in which sovereignty was conceived and how such changes render the concept ever more elusive in the present day. Bartelson’s genealogy is a direct response to what he sees as the dead-end move of empirical analysis and the scientific approach described above, one that posits sovereignty as a given within an already predetermined framework and then seeks to simply define it. Such an approach for Bartelson does not tell us anything of how we got into such a situation, let alone provides an adequate account of sovereignty. The series of decisions that contemporary analysis makes implies a process of differentiation and is therefore political: “If knowledge is understood as a system for the formation of valid statements” he says, “all knowledge is knowledge by differentiation, and this differentiation is a political activity.”<sup>100</sup> It is to account for this differentiation that Bartelson takes up his Foucauldian genealogy.

These consequences of failing to account for sovereignty’s transcendental conditions point to a second reason for beginning a discussion on sovereignty deconstructively. As we have seen, any attempt to claim to know the meaning of sovereignty implicitly commits us to a presupposed set of assumptions about what sovereignty *is*. A deconstructive approach alternatively aims at uncovering the uncontested foundations of sovereignty in modern political discourse and thus shifts the focus from a question of *meaning* to a question of *function*. Crucially, there is no objectively free zone from which to make such judgements. Jacques Derrida described these ‘movements of deconstruction’ as ones that do not “destroy structures from the outside,” and which “are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*.”<sup>101</sup> A deconstructive approach to sovereignty, therefore, reveals that it operates within the discourse of sovereignty itself and not from an abstracted zone of indifference.<sup>102</sup>

With these considerations, then, this chapter proposes to expose the transcendental conditions of sovereignty as they are taken up in contemporary discourse. As alluded to in the previous chapter, this point of departure will focus on the theological claims about sovereignty’s

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<sup>99</sup> Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pg. 5.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>101</sup> Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans) *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1967]), pg. 24.

<sup>102</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature, Event, Context’ in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pg. 329.

relation to ‘the political’ in the work of Carl Schmitt. These claims assert that ‘the theological’ founds or is the diagnostic tool with which to understand the conceptual apparatus of the political. Sovereignty and the political are either sustained by the theological or at least cannot be understood independently of it. The nature of this relationship may be debated further, however, our goal here is to minimally affirm the general, if still ambiguous claim that theology and the political are involved in a nuanced set of legitimating causes and consequences. This view, therefore, does not see theology as a necessary superstructure which simply critiques the material-economic base, but rather sees theology and politics as *both* implicated in each other in the constitution of political communities. The corollary of this intermingling of sovereignty and theology, therefore, is the theme of ‘political theology’ and what Derrida calls with a broadened scope the “political theogony” of ipseity latent in the various discourses of modernity.<sup>103</sup> These syntagmata coincide with a wider phenomenon in contemporary discussions of politics and philosophy, namely, the ‘religious turn’ in philosophy as well as in contemporary political theory, which we have alluded to above.<sup>104</sup>

What we find in Schmitt’s political theology are two points which frame the content of this chapter. The first is located in an implicit claim we have already begun to describe, namely, that a view of political theology is taken which elucidates a bidirectional ‘transposition’ between theology and politics, seen as not only necessary but unavoidable: politics and theology cannot be separated. The second point, which is also the explicit and critical task of this chapter, is to show that Schmitt’s formulation of politics and sovereignty depend upon a conception of Christian eschatology that is conceived as a ‘politics of presence.’ The historical outcomes of a ‘politics of presence’ will not be assessed with respect to Schmitt, but rather the philosophical implications of sovereign ‘presence’ will be interrogated vis-à-vis the philosophical hermeneutics of John Caputo, beginning with his early investigations of Martin Heidegger and then later Jacques Derrida. The dual aim of this chapter, then, is to affirm the importance of political theology and sovereignty as it is conceived by Schmitt but also to draw

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<sup>103</sup> Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.) *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pg. 17.

<sup>104</sup> From a philosophical perspective, this turn was famously criticized by Dominique Janicaud, see Dominique Janicaud, Bernard G. Prusak (trans.) “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, [1991] 2000), pp.3–103. For a contrasting position on this turn see, Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). With respect to political theory, some of the prominent names that surface in the literature (and are usually of leftist orientation) include: Giorgio Agamben, Patricia Dailey (trans.) *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier (trans.) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute; or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) and Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

its limits so as to set-up the problematic of a political theology that might be read through the radical theology of John Caputo.

Before attending to the claims of Schmitt and the implications for sovereignty and the political theology in question, the issue of context must be raised since it is only in the purview of the anxieties experienced in Weimar Germany and the succeeding years that one can make sense of Schmitt for our own political challenges. In this regard, the current situation can broadly be described as the *crisis of liberal democracy* and the concomitant disaster of twenty-first century global capitalism. In the midst of this crisis, there is the oft-spoken of paradoxical tension between liberalism's political virtue of maximal freedom and the democratic social call for equality. The crisis itself emerges when either freedom or equality accumulate in an unbalanced way. This crisis is as much a crisis of government as it is a crisis of identity, because both rest, as is well-known, on different traditions of what it means to be human. Describing this paradox, the political theorist Chantal Mouffe writes, "On the one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other, the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty."<sup>105</sup> The crisis of liberal democracy fluctuates depending on which side of the scale this paradoxical polarity weighs. In the twenty-first century, we are still living with the after effects of a reassertion of the liberal principle over the democratic stemming from the Reagan-Thatcherite eras. What becomes apparent in this tussle is the question of sovereign foundations and the lack thereof, which both liberal and social forms of democracy circumvent under the conditions of secularization that they take for granted.

With aggressive neo-liberal authoritarian market policies, which lead to outsourcing models that provide basic services and welfare, the lines between government and private interests have become increasingly blurred. Lack of accountability created in this environment has weakened public trust as the 'democratic deficit' continually widens. In short, liberal democracy has been experiencing an identity crisis to such an extent that theorists have begun to call our situation 'post-democratic.'<sup>106</sup> Discussions of political theology have arisen in precisely this context; with particular interest in Schmitt's political theology and his concept of sovereignty.

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<sup>105</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), pp.2-3.

<sup>106</sup> See Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).



The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows: it begins in section two with a description of the present liberal democratic or post-democratic condition of contemporary governance and illustrates how this raises the question of sovereignty and therefore political theology. This description will draw on the analysis produced by Graham Ward – in his *Politics of Discipleship* (2009)<sup>107</sup> – who has been influential in articulating the subtleties of contemporary culture with respect to recent trends in philosophy and religion. In this analysis, we follow Ward's outline of democracy's crisis that first manifests itself in the nineteen-twenties and swings in variations directions up until our present 'post-democratic' context. We adopt the central argument of his analysis, namely, that liberal democracy is as slippery a term as it is unstable, since it revolves around a vacuumed center which it desires to fill, while at the same time itself denying that possibility. Ward's project veers into what he calls a 'renaissance of the metaphysical,'<sup>108</sup> which seeks to fill this center with an updated metaphysics. While this is no doubt an important and provocative proposal (consolidated also by others from a predominantly orthodox Anglo-Catholic background), we are for now only interested in his account of the current democratic dilemma.<sup>109</sup> At the conclusion of this description the question of sovereignty and political theology will have to be raised. This is taken up in the third section of the chapter which attends to the controversial figure of Carl Schmitt.

In reading, arguably, two of Carl Schmitt's most important texts already mentioned above, *Political Theology* (1922) and *The Concept of the Political* (1932), of interest will be the nature of Schmitt's conservative response to parliamentary democracy in the climate of Weimar liberalism. Through his definition of sovereignty, grounded in a re-assertion of the theological, Schmitt attempts to properly define a 'true' concept of the political in terms of the infamous friend-enemy distinction. In direct contrast to the immanent tradition stemming from Baruch Spinoza and his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670)<sup>110</sup> – which paved the way for the democratic order from his critique of religious authority – Schmitt wants to reaffirm the political in terms of a transcendent appeal for legitimation. This much is clear from the infamous opening line of the third chapter in *Political Theology*, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts."<sup>111</sup> In response to stifling

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<sup>107</sup> This was the third of a three-part book project see Graham Ward, *Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000) and *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 152.

<sup>109</sup> For a critique of Ward's metaphysical approach see Daniel Miller, "Theocracy, Eschatology, and the Ephemeral Church: Graham Ward and the 'Crisis of Democracy' in *Political Theology* 17. 4 (July 2016), pp. 337-360.

<sup>110</sup> Baruch Spinoza, Jonathan Israel (ed.), *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 36.



political neutralization and depoliticization that occur in liberal democracies, a concept of sovereignty is delineated in the ‘state of exception.’ That is, according to Schmitt, a juridical justification for underived authority that founds the law but exists outside of it – a fundamentally undemocratic act; “The sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.”<sup>112</sup> Through the analogue of a transcendent and omnipotent God, Schmitt thinks he is able to provide both the rationale and critique of liberalism’s contradictions and lack of a singular decision-making capability.

Beneath what Mark Lilla calls Schmitt’s “politics of theological despair”<sup>113</sup> or what Derrida terms the “implacable logic of absolute hostility,”<sup>114</sup> lies a certain nostalgia for a neatly organized and distinguished world before the “crisis of the modern problematic of church/state/society.”<sup>115</sup> The latter, argued in section four, is ascribed to a modern reading of Christian eschatology, wherein the omnipotent and sempiternal nature of God is preserved in the unavoidability of the sovereign decision that makes politics possible. To sustain this claim, we turn to Schmitt’s concept of the *katechon*. This enigmatic figure, which appears in his writings during and after the Second World War, serves a key function in Schmitt’s concept of Christian history. Its deployment not only acts as an apologetic for Schmitt’s politics of the total state – as the restraining force against evil and disorder – but also provides the eschatological framework that makes his ‘politics of the present’ plausible. At this point in the chapter, we will have exposed the transcendental (theological) conditions of sovereignty as they occur in Schmitt, the dominant voice in contemporary discussions of sovereignty and political theology. The concluding section, then, continues the deconstructive gesture set out in the course of this chapter. It suggests a ‘radical hermeneutic of sovereignty’ based on Derrida’s notion of ‘non-identity repetition.’ In this regard, Derrida’s *Rogues* essay will be considered, since it is exemplary not only for its illustration of non-identical repetition but for doing so with specific reference to sovereignty. The ensuing discussion is not meant to be a comprehensive exploration of Derrida’s thinking of sovereignty, but rather serves as a transition to the radical approach taken in this study and to foreground some of the themes that will become evident in Caputo’s religious reading of Derrida and his subsequent radical theology.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pg. 5. In Schwab’s footnote a “state of exception includes any kind of severe economic or political disturbance that requires the application of extraordinary measures.”

<sup>113</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York: NYRB, 2001), pg. 76.

<sup>114</sup> Jacques Derrida, George Collins (trans.) *The Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso, [1997] 2005), pg. 156.

<sup>115</sup> Carl Schmitt, Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (trans.) *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of and Political Theology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pg. 44.

## II. The Crisis of Liberal Democracy

In *Politics of Discipleship*, theologian Graham Ward<sup>116</sup> sets out to prescribe a Christian worldview that can adequately respond to the transient conditions of the twenty-first century. He espouses a ‘postmaterialist agenda’ that intersects a ‘Christian imaginary’ opposed to the “purely material understanding of objects, activities, and values.”<sup>117</sup> Before offering his ‘call to action,’ as Jamie Smith declares in the editor’s preface, Ward first examines in detail three dominant trends in contemporary Western society; the political (crisis of democracy), the economic (globalization) and the cultural (the new visibility of religion). Since our concern is with the concept of sovereignty, we shall concentrate only on the first chapter, “Democracy: Crisis and Transformation,” where Ward’s interest is not only with ‘the political’ but also with sovereignty in particular. Indeed, the theological reflections that follow his description of democracy’s crisis are motivated, he says, by a need to “revisit the theological foundations of sovereignty.”<sup>118</sup> While Ward’s theological reflections are explored in a direction that we will not pursue in this study, it is worth noting that in his analysis he is thinking specifically of sovereignty with Carl Schmitt in the background. In this respect, not only has he translated together with Michael Hoelzl two of Carl Schmitt’s works, *Political Theology II* (1970) and *Dictatorship* (1921), he also begins this chapter with an epigraph taken from Schmitt’s *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923), which aptly sets the stage for our discussion: “The domination of ‘capital’ behind the scenes is still no form, though it can undermine an existing political form and make it an empty façade. Should it succeed, it will have ‘depoliticized’ the state completely.”<sup>119</sup>

Ward’s analysis of the crisis of democracy is framed as a historical description. It aims to illicit liberal democracy’s fragility from its early modern inception up until the ‘postdemocratic’ condition visited upon us today. He locates the initial fragility in a tension that exists in the combination of two concepts: ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy.’ This tension is mapped onto a general trend that he detects between what he calls ‘micro’ and ‘macropolitics’ – the former drifting toward the latter. In the most basic self-understanding, modern governments perceive their

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<sup>116</sup> Ward has made numerous interventions across a number of fields including postmodern philosophy, critical theory, theology and more recently anthropology and neuroscience. See Graham Ward (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Barth, *Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *Theology and Contemporary Political Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 33.

<sup>118</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 39.

<sup>119</sup> Schmitt quoted in Ward, *Ibid.*, pg. 37.

practices as ‘democratic,’ that is, as ‘rule by the people,’ despite the many variations that are evident (parliamentary, federal, constitutional etc). The first tension that emerges is that in reality most forms of democracy are simply *not* ‘rule by the people,’ but are only represented by elected officials to avoid the “tyranny of the majority”<sup>120</sup> as Tocqueville had pointed out. To balance this tendency of democracy, the rights of the individual must be upheld at all costs. “This is why,” Ward writes, “democracy in these countries [the ‘West’] is called ‘liberal democracy,’ for ‘liberal’ here signals the withdrawal of state power so that individuals might exercise their maximal freedom as long as they do not injure or infringe the freedom of other individuals.”<sup>121</sup> Liberal democracy is thus the tension between the micropolitics of liberal freedom and the macropolitics of a polity. For Rousseau, this was the ‘problem of politics’ – the relationship between freedom and equality, a problem that was like “squaring the circle in geometry.”<sup>122</sup>

Ward shows that the distinction between micro and macropolitics can be directly mapped onto others – for example, a democratic polity and a democratic culture or ethos – which “exist as a complex interaction and at times call each other into question.”<sup>123</sup> This difference (between a democratic ethos/culture which can question a democratic polity – by means of peaceful protest, for example – and a democratic polity – which can question a democratic ethos when laws are imposed by the state) – is equally related to another distinction which reflects the micro-to-macro trend, namely, private and public law. Following the Italian theorist, Norberto Bobbio, public law emerges only after the rise of the state, whereas before there were only private contracts.<sup>124</sup> Ward states that while Bobbio is sensitive to the fact that there were times when the primacy of public and private law would oscillate, the reality is that liberal bourgeois society viewed government (democratic polity/ethos and public law) only as a necessary evil from which it only required security. The liberal state, which is older than democracy, therefore, reflects an ethic of humanism grounded on “natural rights...trumpeting both religious and economic freedom for self-expression and development.”<sup>125</sup> The tension becomes most explicit when the democratic ethic, which

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<sup>120</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, James T. Schleifer (trans.) and Eduardo Nolla (ed.), *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 2010), pp. 410-415.

<sup>121</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 40.

<sup>122</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, V. Gourevitch (ed.) *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pg. 179. See for a discussion on Rousseau and the “paradox of sovereignty,” Simon Critchley, *Faith of the faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 59-67.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pg. 41.

<sup>124</sup> Norberto Bobbio, Peter Keanley (trans.) *Democracy and Dictatorship: The Nature and Limits of State Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., pg. 42.

defined the individual as part of a greater whole – and thus requires a more extended notion of the state to ensure maximal equality – pushes against liberalism with an “implicit notion of socialism and a welfare state.”<sup>126</sup> This move describes, in short, the trend toward macropolitical models of the twentieth century.

### I. Three Examples in Democracy’s Crisis

The first part of Ward’s historical description highlights the inherent tension in the locution ‘liberal democracy.’ In the second part, he turns to three examples in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that illustrate the ‘crisis of democracy’ at the point when these tensions are ‘subject to fluctuations of time and circumstance.’ The first arises from a set of lectures by the British political scientist, Harold Laski, given in 1931 at Yale University and subsequently published under the title *Democracy in Crisis* in 1933.<sup>127</sup> The context of Laski’s lectures was the period leading up to and after the stock market crash of 1929; Britain was at an all-time economic low, Weimer Germany was experiencing the after-effects of America’s depression, and the arrival of the Nazi Party in the *Reichstag* heightened political uncertainty. “The lexicon of crisis characterized European culture in the interwar years,”<sup>128</sup> and it was to this that Laski responded.

The primary concern for Laski in democracy’s crisis – significantly parliamentary democracy as it unfolded in the nineteen twenties – was the fictitious claim that public representatives truly embodied the will of ‘the people.’ For him, the falsity of this claim lies in the sheer disproportionality of representation that issues from limited suffrage and which therefore is able to mask the connection between parliamentary democracy and capitalism.<sup>129</sup> As parliamentary democracy developed, “there was not universal suffrage such that the people could register their opinion, and therefore the sovereignty of the people – and the legitimacy of that sovereignty – was based on a narrow class of those who constituted ‘the people.’”<sup>130</sup> With the rise of socialism, various working class movements, and the ascent of the Labour Party in Britain, Laski witnessed an emerging consciousness that questioned the liberal tendency in parliamentary democracies, namely, that tendency which relied on free debate, discussion and deliberation at the expense of an embodied will of the masses. The connection

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pg. 43.

<sup>127</sup> Harold Laski, *Democracy in Crisis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1933).

<sup>128</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 44.

<sup>129</sup> For more on Laski’s arguments of the limits of capitalist democracy, see Peter Lamb, *Harold Laski: Problems of Democracy, the Sovereign State, and International Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 45-69.

<sup>130</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pp. 45-46.

between liberalism and capitalism, as we will see below, was part of what drove Schmitt's critique. Although, whereas Schmitt's response would be an assertion of decisive action, Laski on the other hand, attempted to "create a myth out of socialism."<sup>131</sup> Significant here, then, is that the crisis of liberal democracy is a crisis of liberalism itself and its rationality, which subsequently drives models of government into more social or even authoritarian forms.

Continuing the theme of crisis, Ward's second example follows the arguments made by the French sociologist, Michael Crozier and the renowned American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, in their report-back for the Trilateral Commission, published as *The Crisis of Democracy* (1975).<sup>132</sup> While giving different reasons, Crozier and Huntington broadly diagnose the period after World War II until the 1970's as marked by another cycle of liberal erosion in favor of the democratic principle. It was in the context of the Cold War, the rise of communism, social democracies (who were creating enormous deficits to pay for social welfare), spiraling inflation and unemployment among other things, that by the end of the seventies social-democratic leaders were on the chopping block. Concurrently, since social democratic states were spending so much more on education, there emerged a new class of youthful intelligentsia that inaugurated a "new egalitarianism." By this Ward means that while the mass movements of the sixties were a form of egalitarian-liberalism – civil, black, gay, women's rights, the protest of big government and in particular, American imperialism – they also produced the new but unintended consequence of an entire generation's gradual withdrawal from the public. The turn to identity politics, consumerism, and the rhetoric of anti-communism meant that by the end of the seventies social-democracy was on the retreat. This would signal a new form of Right-wing politics of an explicit neoliberal kind. It was to be understood as 'Neo-liberal' to the extent that it upheld an apolitical individualism and laissez-faire approach to capitalism, although this time it would be neoliberal economics breeding "a capitalism without conscience,"<sup>133</sup> as Ward remarks.

If Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher took up the baton of this new form of authoritarian politics, then it was surely passed on to Tony Blair's New Labour and the presidency of George W. Bush, with their subsequent ideological positions ushering us into the twenty-first century. Ward's final example of democracy's crisis, which he titles "The Return of the

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pg. 48. Laski would later become the chair of Labour Party from 1945-46. For a comprehensive biography see Michael Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>132</sup> See Michael Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Jōji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

<sup>133</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 54

King,”<sup>134</sup> considers this historical transition of political moods captured by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). In the former, Ward argues that despite the tensions in Fukuyama’s thesis (tensions that he was well aware of),<sup>135</sup> liberal democracy as the triumphal form of government paradoxically develops into a strong-state mentality in order to preserve the neo-liberal economic agenda. Fukuyama’s argument, Ward indicates, is rooted in the secularization thesis. The trans-historical standard he promotes to measure democracy is a liberal humanism grounded in “a universal and optimistic view of human nature.”<sup>136</sup> But such a view collapses the nature of ‘desire-for-recognition,’ integral for human communities, into an economic modality that is ultimately imperialistic and thus conflictual. Contrary to Fukuyama, Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* takes into account the resurgence of global religion. The importance of his analysis, Ward suggests, is to have recognized in the other major civilizations (Sinic, Orthodox and Islamic) a modernization that rejected liberalism and embraced authoritarian forms of government. The outcome of the ‘clash’ between the growing ‘threat’ from the East, therefore, was to address the West’s decline by insisting on liberal-democracy’s imperialistic program. Summarizing this situation, Ward writes, “Although, then, democracy seemed to recover from the crisis of the 1970s, it did so by morphing and bringing to power a range of new decisionist leaders who effectively reasserted the liberal principle over the democratic. A king returns. But he does so at a cost, and it is this cost with which we in the West are still living.”<sup>137</sup>

## II. The Postdemocratic Condition

The cost of the triumph of liberal democracy is the goaded sense of public mistrust in the institutions which claim to represent it. This situation has become known in Europe as the ‘democratic deficit,’ but seems equally relevant as a general description for the political conditions evident in many other nations in the West.<sup>138</sup> Compounded by rhetoric and policy

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<sup>134</sup> This is a reference to the work of Claude Lefort’s *Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986), and also to Ernst Kantorowicz’s seminal work *The Kings Two Bodies* (1957) as well as to the title of the last *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. Ward does not mention that film in particular, but refers to the franchise as a whole as a prime illustration “of the resurgence of the mythological” i.e. a desire for the ‘return of the king,’ pg. 150. The figure of the sovereign King is also one that occupies Derrida’s late work, and which we shall return to at the conclusion of this study.

<sup>135</sup> Ward is critical of those who read Fukuyama too simplistically, like Huntington.

<sup>136</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 61.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., pg. 63.

<sup>138</sup> This growing ‘gap’ or ‘deficit’ in liberal democracy is well represented in the case of the European Union and its member states. On the one hand, in order to manage problem-solving capacities needed to respond to the demands of globalized markets, technological information flows and military industry, states have had to transfer rights to supra-state institutions. On the other hand, there is a growing concern that such transfer reduces the



evident of a 'security-state' in the United States following 9/11, and the discourse around refugees in Europe, Ward correctly cites the "well-known political platitude that if a citizenship feels insecure, then it demands more authoritarian forms of governance."<sup>139</sup> It is from this more subtle version of authoritarianism which masks itself as liberal democracy that public mistrust manifests and democratic deficits increase. The 'postdemocratic', according to the work of Colin Crouch, thus describes a context which erodes trust at its root. There are four indicators that bear witness to this trend, and although Ward published *Politics of Discipleship* in 2009 and drew on Crouch's *Post-Democracy* published in 2004, it will not be difficult to find parallels in the present moment of contemporary politics.

The first indicator points toward the 'aestheticization of politics' that goes back at least to Joseph Goebbels and the personality cult that developed behind Hitler. The dangers of political myth generation were recognized and rightly criticized very early on,<sup>140</sup> but it seems that the increasing role of media in politics has reached new levels that we are still trying to understand. Indeed, beyond insipid political campaigning paid for by lobbyists, it is the age of hyper-digitalization of information and its transfer through social media platforms that has raised the stakes, and evidently, plays now a determinate role in shaping constituencies. Indeed, the increasing importance played by the role of a politician's media 'image' or media 'presence' is such that it seems almost impossible to differentiate between a substantive political cause and an aggressive marketing campaign.

This leads ostensibly to the next indicator of the post-democratic moment, namely, the collapse of 'the social' or 'the political' into the economic. And here we see again the tension inherent in liberal democracy, because under this schema the democratic principle will always be a hindrance to the logic of neoliberal economics. Equality of opportunity may signal a democratic vision, but this so-called equality under the auspices of a radically open market

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constitutive force of the people, and therefore we should be defending a qualified sense of nation-state sovereignty. The latter is the position of the political scientist Dieter Grimm, and recalls a popularized debate he had with Jürgen Habermas on the nature of European constitutional identity. See Dieter Grimm, "Does Europe Need a Constitution?" in *European Law Journal* 1 (1995), pp. 282-302 and Jürgen Habermas, "Remarks on Dieter Grimm's 'Does Europe Need a Constitution?'" in *European Law Journal* 1 (1995), pp. 303-307. See also Dieter Grimm, "On the Status of the EU's Democratic Legitimacy after Lisbon" in *The Constitution of European Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Dieter Grimm, *Sovereignty: The Origin and Future of a Political and Legal Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). Thank-you to Dirkie Smit for pointing out that Grimm also consulted in the drafting of the new South African constitution.

<sup>139</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 63.

<sup>140</sup> See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pg. 241. See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Chris Turner (trans.) *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).



based on competition is necessarily undermined if productivity is to win the day.<sup>141</sup> The situation emerges where, ultimately, in order to keep up these economic principles, the intermediate democratic procedures that are characteristic of democracy have to be circumvented. We have, then, a slide into more authoritarian political forms that minimize accountability as they proceed to outsource services usually provided by the state. The spin-off here is that the state loses its obligation to the electorate, and effectively the responsibility afforded to its citizens is replaced by the demands of its shareholders. Indeed, one might even speak of an entire sea-change in the public domain. Ward calls this the specificity of society “giving way to the amorphousness of the language of ‘culture’; the social becomes the cultural.”<sup>142</sup> In a Foucauldian vein, this collapse manufactures an entirely different social milieu with its own subjectivities, “a conception of society as an *enterprise made up of enterprises* comprises a new subjective norm, which is no longer precisely that of the productive subject of industrial societies.”<sup>143</sup>

The ‘postdemocratic,’ as conceived by Ward, beckons a crisis of representation on the one hand, and a corresponding ‘depoliticization’ on the other, the final two characteristics of the analysis. In the former, the alliance between capital and politics renders, at best, those elected into power sufficiently impotent, and at worst, indifferent to their own constituencies while fully occupied with self-serving curiosities, whether monetary or political. This self-referential system of politics and economic interests leaves those most vulnerable steadily behind, evoking a growing sense of disenfranchisement coupled with rage. The latter characteristic, that of depoliticization, seems to name the encompassing outcome of the ‘postdemocratic.’ As with Laski, who pointed out the fictitious nature of democracy with respect to representation and how this could lead to the clandestine connection between liberal parliamentarianism and capital, so too had Carl Schmitt referred to the ‘depoliticization’ cause by liberal politics of the Weimar government. Crucial for this argument, therefore, is that the crisis of democracy and the postdemocratic condition, as described by Ward, refer us back to the critical questions already being asked in the first half of the twentieth century; “Perhaps the West has made a circle back to the 1920s, where our analysis began.”<sup>144</sup> And indeed, this is the main reason why there has been a resurgence of interest in the work of Carl Schmitt.

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<sup>141</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 68.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., pg. 71.

<sup>143</sup> See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, Gregory Elliot (trans.) *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society* (London: Verso, 2013), pg. 283. Emphasis added. See also, Michel Foucault, Graham Burchell (trans.), Michel Senellart (ed.) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>144</sup> Ward, *Politics of Discipleship*, pg. 72.

### III. Schmitt's Political Theology

Over the last three decades there has been a veritable explosion of scholarship on the work of Carl Schmitt.<sup>145</sup> Controversy surrounding him abounds and not least for his membership to the Nazi party, which he joined in May 1933 (incidentally, the same month as did Martin Heidegger).<sup>146</sup> His work is highly contested, with commentators from across the political spectrum expressing very little degree of consensus, labeling him everything from a traditional nineteenth-century liberal, an Italian-style fascist, an anti-liberal anti-Semite, a catholic conservative counterrevolutionary, and one of the most incisive theorists of parliamentary democracy.<sup>147</sup> As one might anticipate, his work has influenced a diversity of thinkers from Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Franz Neumann, George Lukács, Alexander Kojève, Walter Benjamin and Jürgen Habermas,<sup>148</sup> to name but a few. Whatever the difficulties are and the ensuing debates involved in pinning him down, his influence over the last three decades has been immense. Since the first English translation of *The Concept of the Political* (1976),<sup>149</sup> Schmitt has left an indelible mark on Anglo-American scholarship (in particular) that notwithstanding his tainted biography, has probably secured his position in the annals of modern German intellectual history.

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<sup>145</sup> A preliminary list of significant texts might include: Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt. Gegenstrebige Fügung* (Berlin: Merve, 1987), George Schwab, *Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt between 1921 and 1936* (Wesport: Greenwood, 1989), Joseph Bendersky, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist of the Reich* (Princeton: University Press, 1983), Paul Edward Gottfried, *Carl Schmitt: Politics and Theory* (Westport: Greenwood, 1990), Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), John McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Heinrich Meier, Marcus Brainard (trans.) *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1998] 2011), Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 2000) and Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). For more reflections on Carl Schmitt literature see Peter C. Caldwell, "Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature" in *The Journal of Modern History*, 77.2 (June 2005), pp. 357-87. Even more recently another massive anthology from OUP has appeared, again reiterating the sustained interest of his thought, see Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>146</sup> Footnoted in his forward to the *Concept of the Political* Tracy Strong records that "Around the time they both joined the Nazi Party, Schmitt initiated contact with Heidegger by sending him a copy *The Concept of the Political*. Heidegger responded warmly and indicated that he hoped Schmitt would assist him in 'reconstituting the Law Faculty.'" Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. xii.

<sup>147</sup> Caldwell, "Controversies over Schmitt," pg. 357.

<sup>148</sup> See Ellen Kennedy, "Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School," *Telos* 71 (Spring 1987), pp. 37-66. Samuel Weber, "Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt," *Diacritics* 22, nos. 2-4 (Fall-Winter 1992), pp. 5-18. Jürgen Habermas, "The Horrors of Autonomy: Carl Schmitt in English," *The New Conservatism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp.128-139.

<sup>149</sup> Carl Schmitt, George Schwab (trans.) *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1976). Before this translation, as Schwab notes in the preface to the 1985 edition, the only other full-length English study was his own *The Challenge of the Exception: An Introduction to the Political Ideas of Carl Schmitt* (Berlin: Dunker & Humboldt, 1970). Following this came Joseph Bendersky's biography, *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), as well three further translations from MIT Press in the 1980s, all contributing significantly to Schmitt's reception in the English-speaking world: *Political Theology* (1985), *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1986), and *Political Romanticism* (1986).

In the following section, we are concerned with (1) Schmitt's critique of liberalism as it pertains to the contemporary crisis of democracy described above. (2) This cannot be understood without taking into account his infamous concept of 'the political' delineated by the 'friend-enemy distinction'. (3) The latter is grounded on a description of the 'political decision' which is the essence of his definition of sovereignty elicited by the phrase, "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception."<sup>150</sup> This phrase constitutes "a general theory of the state" by introducing transcendence into politics (*political theology*), which it will be argued, is itself dependent on (4) a Christian eschatological vision that informs contemporary political-theological thought.<sup>151</sup> Given the centrality of these nodal points in Schmitt's thinking and their necessary interdependence, we cannot altogether treat them separately. Indeed, it is precisely naïve separations and hasty distinctions that are made by liberalism and modernity that are the target of Schmitt's writings. Furthermore, although his writings are typically aphoristic, philosophical, and concise sets of arguments, which can be understood as self-contained in a particular work, these arguments must be placed alongside one another in order to evoke the main thrusts of his thought. In doing so, it is possible to detect something of an argumentative outline, which we hope to reflect by the structure set forth below. To attain this necessarily limited description – of 'the political', political theology and sovereignty – we begin by attending to a consistent feature of disquiet for Schmitt to which his work is ultimately a reaction: summarily recognized here as the question of the State with respect to the age of 'technology'<sup>152</sup> within the overall decline of Western Europe.

## I. "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticization"

What is 'technology' for Schmitt? As John McCormack's important study *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism* (1997) suggests, liberalism for Schmitt, and in particular parliamentary democracy and constitutional law, are "extensions, or even applications, of the more general

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<sup>150</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 5.

<sup>151</sup> The 'political-theological' thought signaled here, does not take its orientation from the trajectory of political theology that was in many ways intended as a direct response to Carl Schmitt (Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann – who themselves played a significant role in influencing Public and Liberation Theology) but rather as it has surfaced especially from the Left in political-legal and philosophical disciplines. The concern here is with the 'theological turn' in contemporary politics and philosophy as opposed to the 'political turn' in theology.

<sup>152</sup> John McCormack, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pg. 4. As with any major thinker, the quest to systematize their thinking in pursuit of 'consistency' is always a difficult and sometimes impossible task. Indeed, some like Jan-Werner Müller in his *A Dangerous Mind* (2003) have argued that there is no unifying thread in Schmitt's oeuvre. In their introduction to the new *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (2016), Meierhenrich and Simons argue the contrary, by asserting a discernable 'motif of order' and 'trinity' "comprised of his political, legal, and cultural thought." Pp. 3-70.

criticisms of modernity," which is summoned by the infiltration of what he calls "technology." Technology is not only and simply 'applied science,' it is also a "neutralizing technical force" that attempts to suppress 'the political.' Schmitt's intellectual interests are not exhausted by the situation of Weimar Germany during the inter-war period (though this certainly gave his project its impetus), but are at base directed at a more general trend within modernity. While Schmitt's cutting criticisms of liberalism in its political particularity appear in *The Concept of the Political* (1932), *Political Theology* (1922) and *Constitutional Theory* (1928), a useful departure point for our purposes covering the nature of this *general* critique of modern liberalism can be found in a lecture he gave in Barcelona, 1929, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations."<sup>153</sup>

In the introduction to this lecture, Schmitt begins with his reactionary gesture.<sup>154</sup> He describes his trepidation over the historical decline of the state of Europe, which is inversely depicted in the rise of Russia; "[w]e in Central Europe live '*sous l'oeil des Russes*.'"<sup>155</sup> He then enters a mode of speculative historicizing which seeks to describe the 'spirit of the present' by 'first becoming aware of our cultural and historical situation.'<sup>156</sup> Schmitt's thesis is that a general structure can be recognized and traced in the last five hundred years around loosely identifiable 'central domains' of thought.<sup>157</sup> These domains, as 'secular stages' in history, share a common structure in that their change is brought about through their 'shifting centers' of intellectual influence. According to Schmitt, there have been five stages since the renaissance; the sixteenth century is structured around a *theological* center, the seventeenth around *metaphysics* and rationality, shunning the latter the eighteenth century was dominated by *humanism* in its notions of duty and virtue, the nineteenth was the era of the *economic*, and the present is marked by *technicity*. Essential to Schmitt's argument is not to mistakenly read this history as a theory of historical progress, but rather to consider the structural affinities that are taking place in each epoch of Occidental history.

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<sup>153</sup> This text is reproduced at the end of the 2007 reprint of *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 80-96. It is also, of course, not the only place that Schmitt's criticisms of modernity are carried out; see also Carl Schmitt, G. L. Ulmen (trans.), *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), Carl Schmitt, Guy Oaks (trans.) *Political Romanticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>154</sup> Schmitt's work in this sense is deeply existential, he is always responding to and through the concrete conditions of human existence; "That all historical knowledge is knowledge of the present, that such knowledge obtains its light and intensity from the present and in the most profound sense only serves the present, because all spirit is only spirit of the present," Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, pg. 80. In *Political Theology*, it is well-known that his concept of sovereignty is written in response to modern developments in constitutionalism typified by the work of Hugo Krabbe and Hans Kelson. See Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 7.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., pg. 80, the French translates 'under the eyes [or gaze] of Russia.'

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pg. 80.

<sup>157</sup> Tracey Strong likens these 'central domains' to Thomas Kuhn's "paradigms" in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1962] 2012). See Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. xxviii.

A central domain of thought is overtaken by another when its problems are solved through a new central domain. Common to each stage, for Schmitt, is the pursuit of a 'neutrality'. Theology as the central domain for example, and therefore, the neutral domain of thought in the sixteenth century, was replaced by natural science and natural theology in the seventeenth century. Schmitt comments in this respect that "the essential point for me is that theology, the former central domain, was abandoned because it was controversial, in favor of another – neutral – domain."<sup>158</sup> The neutral domain, therefore, is a site of contestation when pressed against another claimant of neutrality: "Europeans always have wondered from a conflictual to a neutral domain, and always the newly won neutral domain has become immediately another arena of struggle, once again necessitating the search for a new neutral domain."<sup>159</sup>

Within this lexicon, one can see how Schmitt can problematize the naïve liberal assumption of the neutrality of technology by exposing the totalitarianism harbored by liberalism itself, that is, a 'weapon' and "irresistible power...as the domination of the spiritless over spirit."<sup>160</sup> Technology is not neutral because it 'serves all' and is just another site of struggle for the next conflict. Schmitt is concerned ultimately with the human being, and he recognizes that the assumed neutrality of the age of technology places human beings in a precarious zone of domination. In what he later calls technology's 'religion' or 'spirit of technicity', there resides "the belief in an activistic metaphysics – the belief in unlimited power and the domination of man over nature, even over human nature."<sup>161</sup> Schmitt's critique of liberalism in terms of 'neutralization' and 'depoliticization' circle back to our contemporary situation, in that the question again of legitimation and authority is raised when the State is run increasingly as "a huge industrial plant,"<sup>162</sup> with the personalistic element completely lost. Schmitt's answer to these questions will ultimately lead to a conception of the political that hastens liberalism's end through a politics of enmity and sovereign decision. The latter, as Agamben has argued, harbors its own totalitarianism latent in the immanent "essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called [liberal] democratic ones."<sup>163</sup>

In the triumph of modern liberal democracy, Schmitt sees an obfuscation and negation of a 'true' concept of the political. If the root of modern liberal democracy is ultimately a 'political

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<sup>158</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 89.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., pg. 90.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pg. 93.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pg. 94.

<sup>162</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 65.

<sup>163</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, pg. 2.

romanticism'<sup>164</sup> typified by a desire for a domain of neutrality and rational deliberation, then Schmitt's argument to reclaim a true concept of the political is precisely to appeal to the *irrationality* of politics. Universal rationality to which we can appeal for legitimation is not only *not* possible for Schmitt, but also invokes a dangerous universalism that seeks to eliminate difference. *The Concept of the Political* is thus an attempt not to provide an 'exhaustive definition'<sup>165</sup> of politics, but rather to locate sufficient 'limit concepts' that make it possible, namely, a concept of the political that is delineated by a friend-enemy distinction – Schmitt's quasi-transcendental condition.

## II. The Friend-Enemy Distinction

Alongside the definition of sovereignty in *Political Theology*, Schmitt's 'friend-enemy' distinction is among his most well-known and frequently-cited contributions to political theory. The distinction emerges as a counter-conception to the proceduralism that wants to 'keep politics safe.' For Schmitt, politics and the nature of what it means to be human is marked by difficulty and danger, and thus is inherent in all political groupings. Politics can never be predetermined; events and situations arise for which a response is required that goes beyond simple deliberation. The relatively unpretentious criterion of friend and enemy, therefore, is the only source of consistency when unique events arise in concrete circumstances for which answers must be produced. What is the character of this distinction and what are its implications?

If liberalism for Schmitt, as we have seen above, is characterized by a *negation* of the political, then a concept of the political must be polemically asserted against this depoliticized mode of discourse; "another system"<sup>166</sup> of the political that brings a true concept into recognition. Schmitt takes his cue for the political from other domains of thought, "not equivalent and analogous" to them, however, and certainly not derived from them, but only structurally similar with respect to what he calls "ultimate distinctions." Thus, in the domain of morality the criterion of good and evil is posited, in aesthetics ugly and beautiful and in economics profitable and unprofitable. With respect to politics, "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."<sup>167</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, especially chapter three, pp. 109-163.

<sup>165</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 26. See also Julien Freund's preface to the French translation of *The Concept of the Political*. Carl Schmitt, *La Notion de politique: Theorie du partisan* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1972), pp. 22-27.

<sup>166</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 71.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., pg. 26.



The friend-enemy criterion is not to be taken as a private vendetta between two people, but is in a specific sense a totality or collectivity (*Gesamtheit von Menschen*).<sup>168</sup> Though public (*öffentlich*), the character of the friend-enemy distinction is still deeply existential because it involves the most extreme possibility of death. Schmitt writes, “The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing.”<sup>169</sup> Here, as Leo Strauss noted, the priority of the enemy mode over the friend mode is made manifest, in that the latter is defined negatively in terms of the former. We can only know who our friends are because of the possibility that there are those who would kill us, and therefore, we are forced to look around for that which is same or other. Strauss comments, “‘Enemy’ therefore takes precedence over ‘friend,’ because ‘the potential for a fight that exists in the region of the real’ belongs ‘to the concept of the enemy’ — and not altogether to the concept of the friend as such.”<sup>170</sup> There is a perverse logic in Schmitt’s accounting of the political here that is identified by Derrida, in what he calls a “political crime against the political itself.”<sup>171</sup> We shall return to Derrida’s critique in chapter six, but for now we can note simply that Schmitt requires an enemy for the existence of the political, and where no enemy exists it must be created. Indeed, with respect to a politics of enmity we have grown accustomed to a certain “Crypto-Schmittianism”<sup>172</sup> in the twenty-first century, especially its emanations from US foreign policy during the administrations of George W. Bush and arguably again in the administration of Donald Trump.

The possibility of enmity and thus the positing of an enemy in a true conception of the political, for Schmitt, is bound to a pessimistic “anthropological profession of faith.”<sup>173</sup> By contrast, in liberalism’s optimistic view of human nature, the state has, at most, a limited role in government and is subordinate to society and culture. This subordination of the state to culture is not a radical denial of the state as such (as in the anarchism), but neither is it a positive theory; “it has produced a doctrine of the separation and balance of powers,” but

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<sup>168</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (München und Leipzig: Duncker & Humboldt, 1932), pg. 16.

<sup>169</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 33.

<sup>170</sup> See Leo Strauss, J. Harvey Lomax (trans.) “Notes on The Concept of the Political” in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 104.

<sup>171</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, pg. 83.

<sup>172</sup> See Simon Critchley, “Appendix: Crypto-Schmittianism — the Logic of the Political in Bush’s America” in *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 133-148. This Crypto-Schmittianism would have to be qualified however. While it is true that the Bush administration and neo-conservatives would have employed the friend-enemy distinction, this would have operated under the horizon of American imperialistic interests, which Schmitt himself would have been critical of.

<sup>173</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 58.



“this cannot be characterized as either a theory of state or a basic political principle.”<sup>174</sup> On the other hand, the tradition of human nature that is ‘evil’, ‘problematic’ and ‘dangerous,’<sup>175</sup> bares a methodological connection to the theological notion of sin. Schmitt thinks that the distinction between sin and redemption shifts the political meaning to morality, which is why he considers Hobbes to be the truly ‘systematic political thinker’, because in Hobbes sin is taken as “the fundamental presupposition of a specific political philosophy.”<sup>176</sup>

It is important for us to understand the *fundamental* sense of this political philosophy. If we recall that Schmitt’s critique of liberalism diagnoses as a failure the ability to think a true concept of the political, and that the distinction he makes between friend and enemy is the principle which affirms a true concept at a fundamental level, then he must show how liberalism’s a-political posture is of political significance – indeed, how it fails to elude the political that it seeks to oppose. Schmitt illustrates this in the realm of law. Firstly, in the domain of law (public or private), the law exists first and foremost to preserve the *status quo*. This preservation, however, benefits those who are maintained by this status – whether political, economic social or otherwise. Secondly, if the *status quo* is to be challenged, liberalism can appeal to “a higher or better law, a so-called natural law or law of reason.”<sup>177</sup> There is, however, an inherent privilege for those who can make this appeal, a ‘sovereignty of men or groups’ who can determine its content and how it is to be applied. The law that appeals to a ‘higher order’ is a pipe dream for Schmitt – ‘an empty phrase’ – because it pretends that a group is not always trying to assert itself over another, an enemy. Thus, in trying to obfuscate the political it only reinstates it and proves that a *true* concept of the political is found in the ability to distinguish friend and enemy.

The state of affairs with which *The Concept of the Political* culminates is that liberalism has successfully produced a series of ‘dissolutions’ in every domain of thought, giving every political concept a ‘double face’ (*verändertes Gesicht*). Battle becomes competition in economics and the state loses its significance as it collapses into society: “on the ethical-intellectual side into an ideological humanitarian conception of humanity, and on the other into an economic-technical system of production and traffic,” indeed, what appears is an “incredibly coherent

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>175</sup> Schmitt cites Machiavelli, Hobbes, Bossuet, Fichte, de Maistre, Cortés, Taine and Hegel, *ibid*.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., pg. 65.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pg. 67. The kind of neo-Kantian political legal theory that would have been represented by Hans Kelsen’s *Das Problem der Souveränität und die Theorie des Völkerrechts* (1920). See also, Dan Diner and Michael Stollies (eds.) *Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt: A Juxtaposition* (Tel Aviv: Schriftenreihen des Instituts für deutsche Geschichte, University of Tel Aviv, 1999).

systematics of liberal thought.”<sup>178</sup> Opposed to this system, Schmitt has given his own which, as we have tried to show in his argument above, was always present but covered over by liberalism itself. Thus, the friend-enemy distinction on Schmitt’s accounting serves as the concept of the political which is presupposed by the concept of the state.<sup>179</sup> The state is that entity which “decides for itself the friend-enemy distinction”<sup>180</sup> and relativizes and encompasses other antitheses in other domains. It is the transcendent actor in “the order of human things,”<sup>181</sup> for it *decides* who can be the enemy and who can be the friend. The question that is now raised is: if the concept of the political, delineated in the friend-enemy distinction, is that which is presupposed by a concept of the state, what precisely legitimates the state? From where does it obtain its sovereignty?

### III. Carl Schmitt’s Concept of Sovereignty

Following the political turmoil and chaos after the First World War, what constituted politics could no longer be understood through neo-Kantian theories of the state. For Schmitt, the scene had shifted to the ever-present possibility of violence and thus a realism that affirmed the human quality behind all politics. Liberal normativism, as we have seen above, is simply unable to placate “the power of real life.”<sup>182</sup> *Political Theology* (1922) is a short political tract, but undoubtedly Schmitt’s most important. It is his attempt to restore the human element in politics by locating a theory of sovereignty that contains a theory of the state. Again, a theory of the state is based on the possibility of making the distinction between friend and enemy. This distinction requires the ability to *decide* — who can make the “genuine decision”? Schmitt’s answer is that “[s]overeign is he who *decides* on the exception.”<sup>183</sup> He elaborates this sovereign according to a secularized understanding of theological power and a political theology that re-inscribes transcendence into immanentist theories of the state.

To get to Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty as it is defined in the opening statement of *Political Theology*, we recall that the state is founded on a concept of the political that resists a legal

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>179</sup> Schmitt reaffirms this position again much later in his career when he writes, “today one can no longer define politics in terms of the State; on the contrary what we can still call the State today must inversely be defined and understood from the political.” See Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II* (Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt, [1969] 1996), pg. 21.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., pg. 30.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pg. 96.

<sup>182</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 15.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid. pg. 5. The ambiguity of the German, “*Soverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet*,” is intentional according to Tracey Strong, see Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

order of universal norms. How then is a juridical or legal order established if not by an appeal to universal principles? From where does the state derive its authority and legitimation if not from the law? In this context Schmitt needs a theory of sovereign power that is able to both establish and maintain the juridical order when such an order is challenged or threatened with anarchy. To conceive the sovereign within the juridical order alone would not only render the sovereign impotent when that order falls into chaos, but it also crucially misses the essential point about the nature of sovereign power, namely, that sovereignty in deciding the exception to the rule also *transcends* the rule of law. One should be reminded that Schmitt is not setting out to normalize an exceptional state of affairs, but rather to locate where power resides when affairs are no longer normal. According to George Schwab, Schmitt's "sovereign slumbers in normal times but suddenly awakens when a normal situation threatens to become an exception."<sup>184</sup> Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is not interested in demolishing the juridical order *in toto*, as it has sometimes been caricatured, but rather in strengthening the state's *raison d'être*<sup>185</sup> by locating the sovereign within, but also necessarily outside, the juridical order.<sup>186</sup>

The definition of sovereignty that Schmitt elaborates is contained famously in his first chapter of *Political Theology*. There he shows that the exception is "more interesting than the rule" because "it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception."<sup>187</sup> The state for Schmitt, cannot be equated to the legal order, for it is only in times of crisis that the state's character as sovereign can be made manifest through the express monopoly it has on all political decision-making. The liberal constitutional attempt to relegate the exception from the juridical order, therefore, also at the same time undermines the sovereign power relevant to the modern state. Based on this opposition to the depoliticization of the state caused by contemporary liberal constitutionalism, as well as the extreme elements

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<sup>184</sup> Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception*, pg. 50. Of course, in the case of Hitler, this sovereign never went back to sleep.

<sup>185</sup> Indeed, to avoid misunderstandings of his theory of sovereignty, Schmitt had published in the year previous to *Political Theology* a comprehensive study on dictatorship, see Carl Schmitt, Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (trans.) *Dictatorship: From the origin of the modern concept of sovereignty to proletarian class struggle* (Cambridge: Polity, [1921] 2014). There Schmitt defined two forms of dictatorship: commissarial and sovereign. He argued that Article 48 of the Weimar constitution sanctioned a 'commissarial dictatorship' because unlike a 'sovereign dictatorship' it sought to uphold the constitution while endeavoring to restore order. Sovereign dictatorship, on the other hand, would abrogate the constitution entirely, in order to bring about a new constitutional order.

<sup>186</sup> Agamben calls the paradox that sovereignty occupies the "zone of indifference." He writes, "in truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other." See Agamben, *State of Exception*, pg. 23. Agamben also claims that to understand Schmitt's concept of sovereignty (as the decision which exists both inside and outside the law) it must be read as a direct response to Walter Benjamin's essay *Critique of Violence* (1921). Benjamin had argued that sovereign power — what he called "divine revolutionary violence" — was extant to the juridical order. For Agamben, Schmitt's move in *Political Theology* to relocate this violence back into the juridical order was precisely in response to Benjamin. See Agamben's insightful discussion in Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp. 52-55.

<sup>187</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 15.

in domestic politics in the Weimar parliament, it is easier to see why Schmitt would have seen no alternative in 1932 than for Hindenburg to have asserted his sovereign powers in order to save the state.<sup>188</sup> The extraordinary quality of these sovereign powers has its analogue in the theological image of the ‘miracle,’ and thus appertains to a *political theology*.

#### IV. Political Theology

In the second infamous line of Schmitt’s oeuvre that opens the third chapter of *Political Theology*, Schmitt states, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” In order to not over-determine this phrase, it should be read in its full context:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.<sup>189</sup>

The introduction of ‘theology’ into Schmitt’s political considerations begins decisively with a qualification that should give the reader pause. At the outset, it is clear that he is participating in a version of the secularization thesis, which, having been a student of Max Weber, comes as no surprise. Schmitt asserts that these theological concepts are important for their “systematic structure” and “sociological consideration,” an example of which was seen in the juridical analogy between ‘exception’ and ‘miracle.’ In order to characterize Schmitt’s political theology, one needs to assess the quality and extent of this analogy and the transference (*Umbesetzung*) it implies. In other words, the first step in understanding the ‘theology’ in ‘political theology,’ lies in determining how Schmitt conceives secularizing theological concepts. This is not the kind of secularization that is affirmed by modern liberal culture, a ‘disenchantment’ of the world that leads to an increased rationality in communal life.<sup>190</sup> Liberal

<sup>188</sup> Infamously, this did not take place and Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler to the chancellery. See George Schwab’s introduction in, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 13-16.

<sup>189</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 36.

<sup>190</sup> Marcel Gauchet has more recently updated the Weberian thesis, arguing that secularization is a positive disenchantment that is intrinsic to the West. See Marcel Gauchet, Oscar Burge (trans.) *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

culture in fact deprives life of the good under “the tyranny of [economic] values.”<sup>191</sup> The secularization that is upheld by Schmitt occurs within the realm of the juristic but with a theological form and function. To be clear, Schmitt agrees with his teacher about the ‘demagification’ of the world, but when he speaks of secularized concepts he means that these concepts have lost their theological ‘quality,’ which is precisely what needs to be restored.

‘Political theology’ imposes a theoretical field on political concepts as they have developed in early-modern history in order to reestablish their hollowed-out meaning. Sovereignty is the guiding concept in this regard, because it determines the principle in the functional transference of theological and political concepts. As such, the sovereign appears structurally the same as the God who performs miracles that break with the natural order. This general hypothesis allows Schmitt to claim that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” There are four stages in the development of the state which demonstrate this structural analogy between God and sovereign. These four stages also show that “the metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization.”<sup>192</sup> In the first stage, the sixteenth-century monarchies were understood within the context of God as the *potentia absoluta*. In the second stage, in the seventeenth century the State is assigned the role of God in the Cartesian system of metaphysics. In the third stage, the eighteenth century sees the State analogously to the deistic god in its disengaged machinery which “now runs by itself.” Fourth, and finally, the nineteenth century viewed the State immanently, “the theistic as well as the deistic concepts of God become thus unintelligible for political metaphysics.”<sup>193</sup> Following this trajectory into the twentieth century does not imply a simple return to an earlier state of monarchical government for Schmitt. He understands that contrary to the counter-revolutionary thinkers (Maistre, Bonald and Cortes) with which he sympathizes,<sup>194</sup> the introduction of transcendence into politics must be democratic (even if this is not the outcome of his political theories in general). He recognizes that while his counter-revolutionary exemplars were accurate in their critique of bourgeois liberalism, their solution was wrong: “in the face of radical evil the only solution is dictatorship, and the legitimist principle of succession becomes at such a moment empty dogmatism.”<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> See Carl Schmitt, Simona Draghici (trans.) *The Tyranny of Values* (Washington: Plutarch Press, [1967] 1996).

<sup>192</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 46.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp. 46-49.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-66.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., pg. 66.

Schmitt's response to Hans Blumenberg's magisterial work *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966)<sup>196</sup> in *Political Theology II* (1970), adds another layer to what he understands by secularization. Blumenberg argued for the independence of modernity as a historical break and thus it has its own self legitimizing rationality. Intimating a secularized theology was for him misleading and impossible within the context of modernity. Schmitt replies that by 'political theology' he speaks from a "juridical point of view," which is not concerned with questions about "diffuse metaphysics." It is rather "the classical case of recasting by means of specific concepts that arise within the systematic thought of the two historically most highly developed and highly formed structures of 'Western rationalism,' namely a recasting between the Catholic Church with its entire juridical rationality and the state of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*."<sup>197</sup> Schmitt's secularization thesis seems to imply a functional utility of theological concepts for political ends. There is a transfer of roles broadly between God and the sovereign, but not a transfer of substance — God does not *become* the sovereign. However, even if God is not the sovereign in any *substantial* sense, the functional analogy does not obfuscate the possibility of a shared absoluteness of both political and theological phenomena. It therefore appears that while Schmitt claims a juristic point of view, there is more theologically at stake in this 'recasting.'

Indeed, the status of Schmitt's work as merely a juristic 'recasting' of theological concepts was challenged provocatively by Heinrich Meier, who asserted that Schmitt's political theology is grounded in his "faith in divine revelation."<sup>198</sup> He goes as far as to say that "political theology stands and falls with faith in revelation. It presupposes the truth of revelation, which is a truth of faith."<sup>199</sup> It is this theological truth that underpins political theology, and which Meier argued, distinguishes it from the political philosophy of Schmitt's student, Leo Strauss.<sup>200</sup> With some irony, it was Strauss's comments in *Notes on the Concept of the Political* which first made known the background of faith in Schmitt's thought,<sup>201</sup> even though this is not the path Strauss himself would follow.<sup>202</sup> According to Strauss, the claim of man's essential dangerousness is

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<sup>196</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), English translation: Robert M. Wallace (trans.) *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>197</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, pg. 117.

<sup>198</sup> Heinrich Meier, Marcus Brainard (trans.) *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1998] 2011), pg. xi.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 66.

<sup>200</sup> Meier had argued that the difference between political philosophy and political theology is what distinguished Strauss and Schmitt, respectively. See Heinrich Meier, J. Harvey Lomax (trans.) *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>202</sup> Meier writes that in Strauss's *Notes on The Concept of the Political*, "Strauss induces Schmitt to give answers that make the background of faith, which is omitted by Strauss, emerge all the more clearly." *Ibid.*, pg. 50.



admitted by Schmitt to be a “confession of faith.” But if as Strauss comments, “man’s dangerousness is only supposed or believed in, not genuinely known, the opposite, too, can be regarded as possible.”<sup>203</sup> Schmitt’s grounding of the political is, therefore, dependent on a theological scenario wherein human beings are found to be ‘by nature evil’.<sup>204</sup> Denying the inherent sinfulness of human beings amounts to a denial of order, and thus “the political theologian dares to press ahead, up to an Either/Or that demands a decision: for faith or for chaos.”<sup>205</sup>

The dialogue between Strauss and Schmitt, for Meier, ultimately converges on the question of how best to live: “political theology and political philosophy are bound together by the critique of the self-forgetful obfuscation or of the intentional bracketing of what is most important.”<sup>206</sup> But where political philosophy for Strauss pursues a rational justification for life, the political theology promoted by Schmitt is grounded in faith in revelation. Meier’s work on the theology of Schmitt is thorough and convincing. Indeed, it is for this reason that *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt* has been said to constitute the “theological turn” in Schmittian studies.<sup>207</sup> Despite this, questions and debate remain; on the one hand, it seems impossible to determine to what extent Schmitt personally held the theological views that Meier commits him to. This is evident in numerous contradictory statements that Schmitt made throughout his career. On the other hand, whatever his personal convictions, how best to interpret Schmitt’s theology is also an ongoing cite of struggle.<sup>208</sup> Although it will not be possible to solve these problems here, we are still able to foreground aspects of Schmitt’s thinking that are clearly theological in nature and which, importantly, offer a lens to interpret his political theology and its long shadow that has been cast onto the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. In this regard, we turn to Schmitt’s understanding of history, which is conceived under a particular rendering of Christian eschatology.

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<sup>203</sup> Strauss, “Notes on the Concept of the Political” in *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 111.

<sup>204</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>205</sup> Meier, *Carl Schmitt & Leo Strauss*, pg. 54.

<sup>206</sup> Heinrich Meier, Marcus Brainard (trans.) *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pg. 84.

<sup>207</sup> See Gavin Rae, “The Theology of Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology” in *Political Theology* 17. 6 (Nov, 2016), pp. 555-572.

<sup>208</sup> See Gavin Rae above.



## IV. Schmitt's Eschatology

One way to approach Schmitt's concept of history and the eschatology that it implies – which is far from systematic or self-evident – is to survey what he considers to be the false conceptions of time and meanings of history which undermine the possibility of political struggle and conflict (his concept of the political). As already mentioned, Schmitt's work can be described as reactionary. To the extent that he considers the current state of Europe and the forces at work which de-politicize and 'technify' politics, one could claim on a "metalevel" that Schmitt's entire oeuvre is aimed at defending the political. In defending the political, however, we have seen that he gives his own positive theory of politics and sovereignty. The same can be said with respect to his conception of time and history. For Schmitt, the meaning of history is an important device in giving content to the relation between friend and enemies, and since there were contending philosophies of history during his time, he could not leave this aspect of his political theology untouched. Though his writings on history and its meaning are scattered and often polemical, there are discernible consistencies with some more pronounced than others. We first consider briefly three thematic areas of Schmitt's concept of history before turning finally to the enigmatic concept of the *katechon*, which, it will be argued, directly reflects his eschatological vision of decision and order.

The political scientist, Matthias Lievens, has recently thematized four areas of Schmitt's concept of history: 1) against the ideological notion of progress, 2) historical singularity, 3) plurality and 4) what he calls the *Katechontic*.<sup>209</sup> Overall, he reads Schmitt sympathetically by arguing that a "metapolitical dimension" of the political "can be studied and endorsed even though one does not agree with Schmitt's concrete political stances."<sup>210</sup> Schmitt's more problematic ideas to which these stances refer, like the strong state, are for Lievens a result of a "territorialization" of the political, and therefore do not affect Schmitt's advocacy for the political as such. This sympathy will ultimately press Lievens to an unconventional reading of Schmitt's notion of the "*katechontic* view of history." For our purposes, we refer to Lievens' investigation of these thematic areas in order to catalogue some of the key moments in Schmitt's thinking of time and history. Lievens' discussion will also serve as a point of reference from which to diverge on his reading of the *katechon*, where he affirms that "it functions in such a way as to keep off the detrimental effects of eschatological ideas on human

<sup>209</sup> Matthias Lievens, "Carl Schmitt's Concept of History" in Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 401-425.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., pg. 403.

political affairs.”<sup>211</sup> By contrast, it will be argued that while Schmitt’s notion of the *katechon* may allow the contingency of the decision to respond to the “call of history,” it nonetheless remains an instrument to maintain the vision of eschatological enmity. The ‘end of history’ that the *katechon* is supposed to stave off effectively articulates a Christian eschatology of a ‘politics of presence,’ which calls for the immediacy of the decision in order to maintain order. Instead of serving as a polemic against the tendency to ‘theologize history’ or promote the detrimental effects of eschatological ideas, as Lievens argues, the *katechon* in fact instantiates this history and eschatology in the present. Lievens writes as a political scientist, and thus whether deliberately or unconsciously is unable to give a fuller *theological* account of Schmitt’s use of the *katechon*. This is perhaps as it should be. However, since we are concerned explicitly with the quality and extent of Schmitt’s use of ‘secularized theological concepts,’ we are obliged to depart from Lievens’ reading of the *katechon* to consider its theological implications.

### I. Schmitt’s Concept(s) of History

Recalling the discussion about the age of technicity – which Schmitt had criticized as depoliticizing – the major historical view he wants to resist is the ideological conception of history treated as an inevitable process. Under this symbolization people become products. They are discursively produced by intellectual and political elites and thus lose their recognized agency in the site of political struggle. Technical progress also inevitably leads to a notion of ‘political progress’ that Schmitt detests. Here, in the move toward ‘world politics’ and cosmopolitanism political enemies become criminals and not opponents. “The day *world politics* comes to earth,” Schmitt argues, “it will be transformed into a *world police power*.”<sup>212</sup> Lievens develops Schmitt’s attention to the enemy and ‘the defeated’ (Schmitt had in mind defeated Germany after the Treaty of Versailles) alongside some comments about Walter Benjamin. He argues that the latter’s dialectic of history and redemptive view of political action in the present (in order to rewrite the history of the past) bares strong resonance with Schmitt’s consternations about political progress.<sup>213</sup> While Lievens takes advantage of this perceived proximity to Benjamin to emphasize Schmitt’s “concern for the defeated,” below we will see that Benjamin’s philosophy of history is deeply problematizing for the Christian eschatological vision upon which Schmitt depends.

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., pg. 418.

<sup>212</sup> See Carl Schmitt, “The Legal World Revolution” in *Telos* 72 (1987), pg. 80, quoted in Lievens, “Carl Schmitt’s Concept of History,” pg. 407.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., pp. 404-405.

The ideology of political progress that is supposedly realized in cosmopolitan steps like the Treaty of Versailles is for Schmitt merely an attempt at repeating history in a manner that is not attentive to the way politics is symbolized in the present. By the end of the nineteenth century and decisively after World War I, “[t]he early modern Eurocentric order of sovereign states (the *jus publicum Europaem*) had become obsolete.”<sup>214</sup> It was no longer enough to revert to applications of previous political attempts at peace-making. What was rather needed was a reconfiguration of the political order around “the singularity of the historical moment.”<sup>215</sup> While the singularity of a concrete social or political formation does not necessarily mean that it is impossible to theorize history (which he enacted around the concept of ‘central domains’), it does mean that historical action must be a response to a concrete situation. Neo-Kantian deductions in moments of crisis are frivolous because history never unfolds in the same way; “my sense of history especially maintains itself by recalling to memory the unrepeatable uniqueness of all great historical events.”<sup>216</sup> History is composed of events and not repeatable automatisms, political generalizations, historical necessity, utopian visions or essentially anything that would undermine the symbolization of the political as composed of a more or less equal struggle between entities. Drawing attention to the significance of conceiving history as a response to the present, Schmitt footnotes in *The Concept of the Political* that what Hegel rightly understood in this regard was “the philosophical truth that all spirit is present spirit.”<sup>217</sup>

Accordingly, this stress of historical singularity leads Lievens to assert that Schmitt endorses a “plural and contingent view of history.”<sup>218</sup> The latter is well captured in the essay surveyed above – ‘The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations’ – where a picture emerges not of a historical linear progress, but of a series of contingent struggles or conflicts over ‘central domains’ of thought. In the context of modernity’s fluid and contingent character, then, Schmitt’s response advocates a decisionism: “a genuinely political decision is an intervention in this multiplicity of temporalities, which ruptures the continuum of empty time.”<sup>219</sup> This sovereign intervention is read as an opportunity for a radical disruption of the present political order which “opens the door for an entirely different conception of time.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., pg. 408.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 62.

<sup>218</sup> Lievens, “Carl Schmitt’s Concept of History,” pp. 411-414.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., pp. 415, 414.

<sup>220</sup> Lievens, “Carl Schmitt’s Concept of History,” pg. 414. Lievens draws on Panajotis Kondylis’s *Konservatismus: Geschichtlicher Gehalt und Untergang* (Stuttgar: Klett-Cotta, 1986). There, Kondylis had argued, contrary to accepted belief, that conservatism was not a reaction to the French Revolution but had its roots in medieval society.

(Ironically, as a figure often associated with the Right, Schmitt's decisionism on this reading is very close to the revolutionary leftism of Alain Badiou, where the transgressive event – the sovereign's decision – ruptures the existing legal order producing a new order and new subjects.)<sup>221</sup>

At this point, however, Lievens' reading begins to run into problems. He himself admits that Schmitt's reactionary decisionism appears anachronistic given the contemporary spirit of depoliticized and technical thinking. He asks, how can Schmitt "in an epoch whose metaphysics...is impregnated by a mechanical and technical way of thinking...take a distance from it and defend the political?"<sup>222</sup> He claims that the need for effective decision seems to have 'posited and 'imposed' itself. But this still does not explain the historical meaning from which this claim is deployed. Thus, the real answer presumably lies in the use of the theological notion of the *katechon*, in order "to reach the polemic intensity required to successfully combat the images of history [Schmitt] opposes."<sup>223</sup>

## II. The *Katechon*

The concept of the *katechon* first appears in biblical literature with two *hapaxlegomena* occurring in the second deuterio-Pauline epistle to the Thessalonians: "And now you know what is now restraining him [τὸ κατέχον], so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains [ὁ κατέχων] it is removed."<sup>224</sup> In the context of the apocalyptic literature, the function of the *katechon* is to constrain the eschatological enthusiasm of the Christian Thessalonian church who are eagerly awaiting the return of Christ. The restraint that the *katechon* enforces is directly related to the forces of evil – the evil one – who brings about disorder and lawlessness. God's historical agent, the *katechon*, not only tempers the eschatological enthusiasm for the *parousia* of Christ, but also by doing so attempts to restore order in the midst of crisis and chaos. The image of

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Crucially, he interpreted the counter-revolutionary Right, represented by Schmitt, as a genuine alternative to mass democracy, and indeed as a form of resistance. See Paul Gottfried, "Panajotis Kondylis and the obsolescence of conservatism" in *Modern Age* 39.4 (Fall, 1997), pg. 408

<sup>221</sup> See Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier (trans.) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Indeed, it is Schmitt's decisionism in Badiou's work that has drawn criticism from others on the left, like Simon Critchley who calls this element in Badiou's thought, the "heroism of the decision." See Simon Critchley, "On the Ethics of Alain Badiou" in Gabriel Riera (ed.) *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pg. 228.

<sup>222</sup> Lievens, "Carl Schmitt's Concept of History," pg. 412.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., pg. 414.

<sup>224</sup> Thess. 2:6-7, *New Revised Standard Version*. For an accessible commentary on this epistle see Martin J.J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians* (London: Routledge, 1994).

the *katechon* is clearly situated within the context of the metaphysical conflict between the forces of good and evil. The period of the *eschaton*, wherein we wait for the heavenly kingdom to be instituted in our temporal reality is marked by evil forces. God, however, appoints the *katechon* to bring about the necessary stability in these last days. Thus, the deeply ambiguous figure of the *katechon* can be viewed both positively and negatively, restraining the forces of evil but also holding back the return of Christ. The symbolization of the *katechon* in Schmitt's thought – in opposition to Lievens who argues that it “represent[s] the future in the present in a specific way, namely, as open and profane, while at the same time recalling the dangers of its closure” – is shown below not only to legitimize his concept of sovereignty, but also becomes the basic structural principle around which the totality of his conception of history is to be conceived.

The figure of the *katechon* is not treated systematically by Schmitt, although it appears frequently between 1942 and 1944 and also in the postwar period between 1950 and 1957.<sup>225</sup> This later usage of the *katechon* is revealing. On the one hand, it begins to explain the defensive and apologetic tone of his work after the war,<sup>226</sup> and on the other hand by way of this defense, evinces the first major reason for its deployment, viz. as a justification or legitimization of the sovereign decision: a defense of a concept of the political which would justify the option of the total state to prevent chaos and produce order. Nowhere more clearly is this defense and desire for order seen in an often-quoted piece of text from Jacob Taubes:

Schmitt's interest was in only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price. This is difficult for theologians and philosophers to follow, but as far as the jurist is concerned, as long as it is possible to find even one juridical, by

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<sup>225</sup> Felix Grossheutschi, who has provided a valuable study of Carl Schmitt's concept of the *katechon* locates it in nine of Schmitt's texts: 'Beschleuniger wider Willen' (1942); *Land und Meer* (1942); *Die Lager der europäischen Rechtswissenschaft* (1943/44); *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951*; *Ex Captivitate Salus* (1950); 'Drei Stufen historischer Sinnggebung' (1950); *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (1950) and 'Die andere Hegel Linie' (1957). See Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt, 1996). Though Schmitt seems to have been the first to re-introduce the term into modernity, it certainly has played a power influence in the history of political theology. By way of example, it is usually attributed to Tertullian in his *Apologeticum* (149 A.D.) for the revised role of the Roman Empire. Tertullian had argued that the Empire was not to be seen as the Anti-Christ but as the *katechon*, that force which should restrain lawlessness. Tertullian, of course had a pro-Roman agenda, but the effects of this reversal would provide the positive attitude toward institutionalized Christianity for the next one and a half millennia. See Eric Osborn, *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon*, pg. 25.

<sup>226</sup> See Michael Hoelzl, "Before the Anti-Christ is Revealed: On the Katechontic Structure of Messianic Time" in Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (eds.) *The Politics to Come: Power, Modernity and the Messianic* (London: Continuum, 2010), pg. 103. For a comprehensive overview of the debate around Schmitt's engagement with the Nazi party, see Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward's introduction to *Political Theology II*, pp. 1-29.

whatever hairsplitting ingenuity, this must absolutely be done, for otherwise chaos reigns. This is what he calls the *katechon*: The retainer [*der Aufhalter*] that holds down the chaos that pushes up from below.<sup>227</sup>

For Schmitt the jurist, no matter the cost, chaos could not rise up (*nach oben kommt*) to the level of the state; the employment of the ‘restrainer’ is necessary, therefore, to suppress (*niederhält*) this chaos. As Michael Hoelzl comments, “The *katechon* is used here as a political and existential category to explain and justify Schmitt’s option for a total state in order to prevent the chaos that threatened the Weimar republic.”<sup>228</sup> Despite Schmitt having joined the Nazi party and not having regretted this decision in the future, Taubes’ interpretation of Schmitt’s understanding of the *katechon* was apparently welcomed by the latter,<sup>229</sup> which lends credence at least to the fact that it was meant to justify a conception of state – and the decision taken by its sovereign – to suppress whatever it saw as the source of evil or chaos.

But more than an apology, the *katechon* is also the central eschatological principle which gives context to Schmitt’s entire concept of history. This is a Christian eschatology of the present that makes possible a “positive political theology”<sup>230</sup> of a ‘politics of the present.’ In a remarkable passage from *The Nomos of the Earth* (1950) Schmitt confirms the centrality of the *katechon* for his understanding of history:

I do not believe that any historical concept other than *katechon* would have been possible for the original Christian faith. The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire.<sup>231</sup>

Schmitt here establishes the *katechon* as both the condition for immanent politics and authentic Christian faith. Without the *katechon* which ‘holds back the end of the world’ (*ein Aufhalter das*

<sup>227</sup> See Jacob Taubes, Dana Hollander (trans.), Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (eds.) *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pg. 103.

<sup>228</sup> Hoelzl, “Before the Anti-Christ is Revealed,” pp. 103-104.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., pg. 104.

<sup>230</sup> See Dirk J. Smit, “‘...on earth as it is in heaven’? On political potentials in theological metaphors” in Harald Lesch, Bernd Oberdorfer and Stephanie Waldow (eds.) *Der Himmel als transkultureller ethischer Raum* (V&R Unipress, 2016), pp. 49-76. Smit writes in contrast to the ‘negative political theology’ of Taubes and Walter Benjamin, “While Schmitt’s thought is a defence of positive political theology, in which power in the form of the state represents religious, theological authority, for Taubes and Benjamin the future (the eschaton, the Messiah, redemption) may not be appropriated by worldly powers. Rather, detachment, withdrawal and refusal are necessary to invest authority and trust in worldly politics.” Pg. 59, fn. 67.

<sup>231</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, pg. 60.



*Ende der Welt zurückhält*) we enter into a ‘paralysis of all eschatological human effort’ (*eschatologischen Lähmung alles menschlichen Geschehens*)<sup>232</sup> and lose the explanatory power of the Roman empire and its Christian continuation to maintain itself against the forces of evil and disorder. A similar conclusion with respect to history was reached in the posthumously published *Glossarium*: “Ich glaube an den Katechon; er ist für mich die einzige Möglichkeit, als Christ Geschichte zu verstehen und sinnvoll zu finden.”<sup>233</sup> Even though Schmitt was never explicit about where the *katechon* was to be found,<sup>234</sup> the places where he does mention it all refer to its function as creating or maintaining order. In a profound irony, if read from a political and juristic point of view (which is what Schmitt claimed at most he was trying to do) the desire for order in the present that elicits a politics and eschatology required to maintain it, issues in a performative contradiction in Schmitt’s work. As Steven Ostovich has noted, “Schmitt developed his political theology as a criticism of legal positivism and its instrumental logic,” but “his concept of the restrainer reintroduces instrumentalism: politics is not substantive but a matter of doing whatever is necessary to maintain order.”<sup>235</sup> The principle of the *katechon* in Schmitt’s eschatology is therefore about maintaining a political order, it is properly a ‘politics of the present.’ It defines “the space between the radically spiritual and the purely political. It is the time window, the mean-time, the in-between of the first and second coming of the Lord.”<sup>236</sup>

It is in this sense — the desire for order and the maintenance of peace — that Schmitt’s eschatology can also be read through the lens of Walter Benjamin.<sup>237</sup> In his Habilitation *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928),<sup>238</sup> Benjamin studied the *Trauerspiel* (mourning play) in the German playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Through his depiction of the Baroque, which departed from classic notions of tragedy, Benjamin provides a reading of sovereign violence that directly interacts with Carl Schmitt. It is predominantly for this reason that he has been rediscovered in the last two decades especially in the fields of political theory, political theology and studies of secularism, with sovereignty being central to these theoretical

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<sup>232</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1974), pg. 29.

<sup>233</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947-1951* (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 1991), pg. 63.

<sup>234</sup> Schmitt speaks of concrete persons, empires, countries, the Church, the Jesuits and political entities. See, *The Nomos of the Earth*, pp. 59-62; *Politische Theologie II*, pg. 81; *Glossarium*, pg. 165.

<sup>235</sup> See Steven Ostovich, “Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, and Eschatology” in *KronoScope 7* (2007), pg. 65.

<sup>236</sup> Hoelzl, “Before the Anti-Christ is Revealed,” pp. 108.

<sup>237</sup> The ‘exoteric debate’, as Agamben calls it, between Schmitt and Benjamin has been thoroughly investigated. See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp. 52-64; Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s-abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and James Martel, *Divine violence: Walter Benjamin and the eschatology of sovereignty* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>238</sup> Walter Benjamin, John Osborne (trans.) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2003)

debates.<sup>239</sup> For our purposes, we briefly note the way in which Benjamin characterizes Schmitt's concept of history, which confirms the claim that it is based on an immanent politics of presence and order.

According to Benjamin, the Baroque-era dramas frame their understanding of history perpetually in terms of a final catastrophe, and it is out of this state of urgency that political structures are formed in order to stave off impending doom. He writes with Schmitt in mind, "as an antithesis to the historical ideal of restoration it [the baroque] is haunted by the idea of catastrophe. And it is in response to this antithesis that the theory of the state of emergency is devised."<sup>240</sup> Thus, contrary to Schmitt, who supposedly devised his concept of sovereignty as the moment of decision on the exception, Benjamin argues that the sovereign is articulated through the task of averting impending eschatological destruction. Benjamin's claim of the way in which the Baroque understands sovereignty – namely, as a political concept that emerges in the wake of the erosion of the 'ideal of restoration' or salvation history – thus situates Schmitt's eschatology on the horizon of a nostalgia for an ordered and peaceful past. If the end and final annihilation of the world is now immanently conceived (as Benjamin claims for the baroque dramas), then we must defend its advent by embracing past utopias. Accordingly, Benjamin writes, "the baroque knows no eschatology," that is, it has no hope in Christian salvation history. But as Annika Thiem has noted, Benjamin is not unambiguous and the idea of history remains uncertain; "This uncertainty is certain only in the sense that the catastrophe is certainly coming, but the catastrophic end remains uncertain with respect to its time of arrival."<sup>241</sup> For Thiem, the uncertain arrival of the certain catastrophic end creates a climate of urgency that the baroque consolidates in an escapist form of hope in a golden past. It is in this sense we can understand Schmitt's desire to reinvigorate anachronistic tropes – indeed, what Thiem calls the 'theological-political ruins' of sovereignty.

At this point, let us briefly recap the course of this chapter. Taking our cue from Balibar, the universalisms of modernity – progress, rationality, knowledge, the priority of the secular – cannot simply be discarded but must be *disturbed* from the inside by 'tarrying' with their contradictions. After Derrida, this situation raised the possibility of what he called a new "Enlightenment to Come," one that in terms of the role of religion in the twenty-first century

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<sup>239</sup> See the 2010 issue of *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 6 (2), with essays from Charles Barbour, James Martel, Jill Stauffer, and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera.

<sup>240</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pg. 66.

<sup>241</sup> See Annika Thiem, "Theological-Political Ruins: Walter Benjamin, Sovereignty, and the Politics of Skeletal Eschatology" in *Law Critique* 24 (2013), pg. 299.

would have to be thought *otherwise*. In the present study, the concept of sovereignty takes center stage as the first analytic axis for such a task which conceives the role of religion in public life. However, it became clear that sovereignty is a slippery term. From the outset, sovereignty revealed itself as a salient yet highly contested concept, evidenced by the extremes of those who see it falling into archaic usage on the one hand, and on the other, by those who wish to vigorously re-instantiate it. What these ambiguities called for was a deconstructive approach that seeks first to expose the transcendental conditions which make the discourse on sovereignty possible. Following a historical-contextual analysis of democracy's crisis as the context in which political theology becomes relevant, the chapter examined the contribution of Carl Schmitt, who is understood as the predominant point of reference with respect to contemporary discourse on sovereignty. Through this analysis, we were able to uncover the metaphysical presuppositions that inform Schmitt's concept of politics, and through a reading of the figure of the *katechon* determine that his politics terminates in a 'politics of presence.' This analysis has confirmed, therefore, the aims set out in the introduction of the chapter, which was to affirm the importance of political theology vis-à-vis Schmitt's conception of sovereignty, but also to draw its limits and thereby open up the possibilities for conceiving it otherwise.

## V. A Radical Hermeneutics of Sovereignty?

Now in seeking to open avenues into thinking sovereignty and political theology differently, we continue the deconstructive approach in this chapter by suggesting a 'radical hermeneutic of sovereignty.'<sup>242</sup> This hermeneutic of sovereignty 'tarries' with its contradictions and ambiguities, and does not merely re-produce its basic structure. On the way to accomplishing this task, we enlist Jacques Derrida and his idea of 'non-identical repetition.' The theme of repetition goes to the heart of Derrida's work, or rather, it is the *performance* of repetition which is Derrida's work – that is, repetition with a *difference*. The vast majority of Derrida's oeuvre enacts this performance. For the sake of this discussion, we need only focus on one of his later and particularly well-known texts, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005).<sup>243</sup> The use of this text is deliberate not only because it clearly evinces the radical hermeneutic of non-identical

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<sup>242</sup> The reference to a 'radical hermeneutic' is deliberately used with John D. Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) in mind and to which we shall turn in chapter 3.

<sup>243</sup> See pp. 161-162 of Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.) *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

repetition we are pursuing, but also because it does so explicitly in terms of sovereignty.<sup>244</sup> It serves, therefore, to foreground a cluster of themes that will be central and which are subsumed by the second analytical axis of this study, namely, the *event*.

In *Rogues*, Derrida leads a discussion into understanding democracy in the present by approaching the question of sovereignty through the concept of the self or *ipseity*. He writes:

Indeed, it seems difficult to think such a desire for or naming of democratic space without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself, toward and upon the self of the origin, whenever it is a question, for example, of sovereign self-determination, of the autonomy of the self, of the *ipse*, namely, of the one-self that gives itself its own law, of autofinality, autotely, self-relation as being in view of the self...*ipseity* in general...the power that *gives itself* its own law, its force of law, its self-representation.<sup>245</sup>

Democracy cannot be thought apart from this circular logic, a logic of the self that only makes sense in terms of its own self-positing sovereign autonomy. The principle of *ipseity*, as the ultimate force of the self, is the same principle which governs monarchs, states, and democracies made up of popular sovereigns. Derrida goes on to say:

Now, democracy would be precisely this, a force (*kratos*), a force in the form of a sovereign authority (sovereign, that is, *kurios* or *kuros*, having the power to decide, to be decisive, to prevail, to have reason over or win out over [*avoir raison de*] and to give the force of law, *kuroō*), and thus the power and *ipseity* of the people (*dēmos*).<sup>246</sup>

The ipsocentric principle has been passed down in an ‘unavowed political theology’ from Plato and Aristotle, “that is at once paternalistic and patriarchal, and thus masculine, in the

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<sup>244</sup> There are many other of Derrida’s texts that also deal with sovereignty, some more explicitly than others, and some of which we will encounter later: see for example, Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 2-67; *Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso Press, 1997); *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994); *Sovereignities in Question: the Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

<sup>245</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

filiation father-son-brother.”<sup>247</sup> Once it is subsumed by democracy, however, it puts at risk the very concept of democracy itself. Its self-deconstruction (Derrida uses the term autoimmunity)<sup>248</sup> becomes visible in the very fact that in order to assert the sovereignty of the people, the people’s own sovereignty must be usurped by those that are meant to represent it. This is the ‘threatening’ and ‘betrayal’ of sovereignty’s force. It is also in this sense that Derrida speaks of *rogue* states: “[a]s soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power and a rogue state. Abuse is the law of use; it is the law itself...There are thus only rogue states.”<sup>249</sup> It would seem inevitable “to call into question and to limit a logic of nation state-sovereignty,”<sup>250</sup> but Derrida is cautious here of falling into false binary oppositions. By simply negating sovereignty one only *repeats* its *identity* (sovereign, ipsocentric, force) in the other direction. Wendy Brown comments that “Derrida does not pursue this dissolution of Westphalian sovereignty into its opposite,” but rather seeks “instead to recover something of sovereignty’s original promise.”<sup>251</sup> Derrida’s deconstructive-hermeneutical approach toward sovereignty does not assume its demise or that it needs to be challenged without qualification. His answer to those like Negri, Hardt and Agamben who want to disqualify sovereignty as a necessary good for global justice, and to those like Foucault, Deleuze and Connolly who render it “philosophically untenable, historically outmoded [and] empirically false,”<sup>252</sup> is to say:

It would be imprudent and hasty, in truth hardly *reasonable*, to oppose unconditionally, that is, head-on, a sovereignty that is itself unconditional and indivisible. One cannot combat, *head-on*, sovereignty *in general*, without threatening at the same time, beyond the nation-state figure of sovereignty, the classical principles of freedom.<sup>253</sup>

Derrida seeks not an *identical repetition* of sovereignty that would completely put into jeopardy all the ‘classical principles of freedom,’ but rather a radical hermeneutic that is based on a *non-identical repetition* of sovereignty. The latter is motivated and underscored by his famous syntagma “democracy to come.” At this point, mis-readings of Derrida abound when

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., pg. 17.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., pg. 100. This is also more fully developed in his famous essay “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” Samuel Weber (trans.) in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.) *Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-78.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., pg. 102.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., pg. 157.

<sup>251</sup> See Wendy Brown, “Sovereign Hesitations” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (eds.) *Derrida and the time of the political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), pg. 116.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., pg. 115.

<sup>253</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 158.

‘democracy to come’ is understood within reach of a particular, definite future, a concept of time and temporality that Derrida calls a ‘future-present.’ Such a future “is not a course set in advance headed toward a telos...a foreseeable, plannable, programmable, anticipatable, masterable future.”<sup>254</sup> Indeed, when reading the *Rogues* text with an understanding of time and history that interprets the ‘to come’ of democracy as an actual ‘event’ in history, there is only a short misstep in assuming that Derrida wants to think of democracy without sovereignty *in toto*. For example, when he begins to talk of “nonsovereignty”<sup>255</sup> one is led to think that he conceives of a ‘future’ in which democracy no longer has sovereignty at all. But as indicated, this is to misunderstand the sense of temporality Derrida is advocating. Rather, a ‘democracy to come’ envisions ‘nonsovereignty’ as an ‘absolute future,’ that is, as another modality of time conceived as a ‘structural impossibility.’ Derrida’s thought is at once neither an affirmation of sovereignty, nor a wholesale rejection of it. It is a ‘hesitation’ as Brown calls it, which radically challenges our sense of time and functions as a kind of ‘genealogical fiction.’<sup>256</sup> This fiction of ‘nonsovereignty’ in a ‘democracy to come’ is the ‘promise’ of democracy, the *event* harbored in the *name* democracy which is always structurally ‘to come.’

A *radical* hermeneutic of sovereignty is one which relies on its necessary ‘iterability’ — a *non-identical repetition*. For Derrida, this kind of repetition involves a degree of remainder of its ‘original’ identity, but also, at the same time, necessarily undergoes an alteration. In *Signature Event Context* (1982) Derrida develops this concept of ‘iterability’ as the condition of writing itself:

A written sign...is therefore a mark which remains, which is not exhausted in the present of its inscription, which can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of an empirically determined subject ...By the same token, a written sign carries with it a force of *breaking* with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription. This force of breaking is not an accidental predicate, but the very structure of the written.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> John D. Caputo (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Forham University Press, 1997), pg. 117.

<sup>255</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 157.

<sup>256</sup> See James Martel, “Can There Be Politics Without Sovereignty? Arendt, Derrida and the Question of Sovereign Inevitability” in *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 6. 2. (2010), pg. 162.

<sup>257</sup> Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.), “Signature Event Context” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pg. 317. Emphasis added.



If we are to read this in terms of the discourse of sovereignty as a ‘democracy to come,’ it becomes a discourse that is not ‘exhausted in the present of its inscription’ — it retains marks which allow it to give rise to iteration. However, it also harbors a ‘force of *breaking*’ with its context, the possibility of thinking sovereignty otherwise as an alternate “space for democracy.”<sup>258</sup> What has not been mentioned and which is often criticized by those who are skeptical of the language of hesitation is that by clinging to sovereignty we nonetheless remain susceptible, not to its promise, but to its betrayal. Indeed, it is the rise of new forms of non-sovereign actors (who are actually supra-sovereigns) — transnational corporations, global terrorism and other exterior state entities — that are able to usurp ‘the people’s’ (*demos*) sovereignty. However, again, this critique is the result of a slippage in readings of Derrida’s argument. It is precisely as a result of these growing instantiations of sovereignty *in-the-present* that are the target of a ‘democracy to come.’ At this stage one may proceed to unpack more of this theme in relation to other well-known Derridianisms, for example, a ‘religion without religion’ or notions of the ‘messianic,’ ‘the gift,’ ‘hospitality,’ or indeed ‘the event.’ One might also critically engage in the *politics* of holding together a tension between sovereignty in the present and a ‘democracy to come’ (which may or may not involve sovereignty), as Brown and James Martel have done.<sup>259</sup> However, while we will return again to Derrida’s treatment of sovereignty later in this study, the goal of this chapter has not been to evaluate his rich and far-reaching thought in particular. The concern has rather been to use his reflections on sovereignty in *Rogues* to begin to think toward a ‘radical hermeneutic of sovereignty’ that is able to tarry with its contradictions. Exploring the religious implications of this radical hermeneutic for sovereignty and political theology will be the task of the remaining chapters concerning John D. Caputo.

In the introduction to this chapter, we began with the remark that we are treating sovereignty as a kind of ‘palimpsest.’ This word comes from the Greek *palimpsēstos* which means “rerubbed” or “rewiped” and refers to ancient manuscripts that were difficult to read because of the erasure of text to make room for new text.<sup>260</sup> It denotes layered-ness, textual history, traces of the past, loss and erasure, and as a part of the very nature of the text. The word is also appropriate, therefore, when describing things that have been transformed or are transformable, covered and covered over, while at the same time still leaving traces of former

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<sup>258</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pg. 169.

<sup>259</sup> See Wendy Brown, “Sovereign Hesitations,” pp. 114-132, and James R. Martel, *Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and the Eschatology of Sovereignty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>260</sup> See Alfred Thomas, *Prague Palimpsest: Writing, Memory, and the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pg. 6.

layers or markers still visible in the present. In this metaphoric sense, perhaps one of the best examples of a palimpsest is the 'Eternal City' of Rome. Indeed, there is a famous description of the City of Rome in Sigmund Freud's introduction to *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), which perfectly captures the palimpsestic nature of its history. Freud tells us that a visitor of today will still see amidst the modern buildings the 'Wall of Aurelian,' parts of the old Roman Quadrata, and in other places only remains of temples and ruins of bygone eras. He concludes the passage: "There is certainly *not a little* that is ancient still buried in the soil of the city or beneath its modern buildings. This is the manner in which the past is preserved in historical sites like Rome."<sup>261</sup> Freud went on to make his now classic claim that religion can be explained in terms of a regression in psychic development. He observed that the nature of 'religion' as an 'oceanic feeling'<sup>262</sup> was in fact related to the "infant's helplessness and the longing...for the father's protection."<sup>263</sup> Crucially, this form of consciousness can persist and is still experienced in the present as "a shrunken residue of a much more — inclusive — indeed, an all-embracing-feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it."<sup>264</sup> We might say here that the palimpsest of sovereignty, as we have seen in this chapter; layered, re-worked, rewiped — still contains Freudian residues of an all-embracing past. Indeed, this is a past that still wants to be remembered in the present as fullness, wholeness, limitless, and eternity. Maybe Freud's traveler through Rome can't help but look at the ancient ruins and remember the Great Roman Empire. It is these, still very visible remnants of a 'sovereignty in ruins,'<sup>265</sup> which are taken up in the various loci of John D. Caputo's thought, to which we now turn.

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<sup>261</sup> Sigmund Freud, James Stratchey (trans.) *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962), pp. 16-17. Emphasis added.

<sup>262</sup> In a famous letter from his friend Romain Rolland, Freud borrowed this coinage to describe the religious as the 'oceanic'. See Clayton Crockett, *Interstices of the Sublime: Theology and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pg. 20.

<sup>263</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, pg. 19.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., pg. 15.

<sup>265</sup> The palimpsestuous nature of sovereignty is also captured in the development of the word 'ruin' itself. The famous Oxford philologist, Owen Barfield, in one of his first published essays traces its history from the Latin *ruo*, denoting 'fall' or 'rush', following its transposition from French to English through the poetical writings of Chaucer and Gower, and finally culminating in Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. It will be the changing nature of words and finding 'their soul' across many histories that would become Barfield's life-long task. See Owen Barfield, "'Ruin: A Word and a History'" in *The Living Age* (20 Jan, 1923), pp. 164-169. This is also, incidentally, the title of a recent volume of important essays on this subject: See George Edmondson and Klaus Mladek (eds.) *Sovereignty in Ruins: A Politics of Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

# Chapter Three

## Overcoming Metaphysics

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### I. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we sought to describe sovereignty and political theology through the influence of Carl Schmitt. This presentation can be understood as representative of an inherited metaphysical and transcendental tradition of sovereignty discourse which continues to influence contemporary political-theological thought. Before moving onto the second axis of this study, which aims toward an evaluation of Caputo's 'weak' or 'radical' theology as a possible mode to think beyond this sovereignty in relation to 'the event,' we must first step back to encounter the 'early Caputo,' since it is here in dialogue with Martin Heidegger that one begins to initiate a discussion of 'overcoming' (*überwindung*) metaphysics – or the desire for political presence *à la* Carl Schmitt.<sup>266</sup>

An account of Caputo's earlier writings as presented in this chapter accomplishes two primary purposes, the second following logically from the first. With respect to the latter, it is in his earlier works where we find a definitive attempt to think beyond metaphysics. Aided by his primary interlocutor, Martin Heidegger, and in particular the "late" Heidegger,<sup>267</sup> Caputo's interest in 'overcoming metaphysics' begins to bring into sharp relief the analysis of sovereignty and political theology carried out in the previous chapter. In the partly discursive reading that follows below, the hermeneutic-phenomenology of Heidegger and Caputo's own radical hermeneutical approach challenge the metaphysical and transcendental notions that inform modern conceptions of sovereignty. A full and explicit confrontation and its

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<sup>266</sup> Caputo has argued, however, that the 'proto-history' of radical hermeneutics (and thus the overcoming of metaphysics) can already be found in Søren Kierkegaard, which Heidegger later 'fused' into *Being and Time* (1927). We will encounter this below in John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>267</sup> The discussion of the 'early' and 'late' Heidegger invokes an industry of Heidegger scholarship, as scholars debate the nature, timing and even veracity of such a distinction. Despite the disagreement and debate, for the sake of simplicity here, we follow Caputo's designation that a shift occurs in Heidegger's thinking after the Marburg period (1923-1928). What takes place before and up to Heidegger's succession of Edmund Husserl in Freiburg (1928) is considered 'early' and after is considered 'late.' For a very lucid and helpful essay that traces Heidegger's life and relationship to theology in this regard, see John D. Caputo's "Heidegger and Theology" in Charles B. Guignon (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 270-288. Caputo identifies the 'crest' of the 'late' Heidegger in the text *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936-8) and the lecture course of 1935, *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

implications for sovereignty as described above, however, will be staged in subsequent chapters where the consummation of Caputo's thought vis-à-vis Jacques Derrida is laid out. This first purpose, therefore, sets the parameters of the agenda for thinking beyond sovereignty in the mode of Caputo's earlier readings of metaphysics, steeped as they are in the Heideggerian tradition and its confrontation with scholastic Thomism.

Secondly, it will be seen that while the investigation of Caputo's earlier work on Heidegger begins to demonstrate the limitations of modern conceptions of sovereignty in a philosophical problematic, it also leads to a critical and just as crucial appraisal of Heidegger himself. The critique of Heidegger that Caputo develops in the 1980's while reading Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, not only raises the stakes of the project of overcoming metaphysics, but also introduces an opening that is fundamental for understanding Caputo's later theological reflections. Indeed, it is this opening, as argued in the present chapter that makes these reflections possible by way of what is called a 'rhythmic impetus.' As will become clear, this impetus that generates Caputo's reading and subsequent critique of Heidegger is determined by a *way of reading* learned from Heidegger's own hermeneutical method. This second purpose, therefore, serves our evaluation by elucidating the formation and influence of Caputo's theological trajectory, and thereby deepening the understanding of what precisely is entailed in overcoming metaphysics and the 'essence' of a radical theology which conceives sovereignty otherwise.

In light of these opening comments, the structure and content of the chapter are as follows. The chapter sets out to distill a 'double gesture' in Caputo's reading of Martin Heidegger. This double gesture initially entails the critique of scholastic metaphysics associated with Thomas Aquinas and the Thomist schools of thought that was circulating in the 1950's and 60's. For the purposes of our argument, the first part of the chapter concentrates on Caputo's second publication; *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay On Overcoming Metaphysics* (1982). Here Caputo attempts to displace the neo-Thomist claim that Aquinas and scholastic metaphysics escape Heidegger's charge of the "oblivion of being" or *Seinsvergessenheit*.<sup>268</sup> Following his analysis, the chapter describes how Caputo's reading of Heidegger displaces the Thomistic metaphysics of *esse*,<sup>269</sup> which fails to think the *Ereignis* or *Aufrag* which opens up the distinction between *esse* and *ens*. Tracing this critique through Caputo's reading of the later

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<sup>268</sup> John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay On Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

<sup>269</sup> In particular, Caputo took up this charge against the readings of the French Thomist Étienne Gilson, see his *Being and Some Philosophers* (1949).

Heidegger constitutes the first treatment and delimiting gesture of 'onto-theo-logical' metaphysics, and which crucially is bookmarked as a structural point of reference for his later theological reflections.

The significance of Heidegger's influence on Caputo does not stop here at the *Destruktion* (destruction) of the 'metaphysics of presence' however. Rather, as will be argued, the manner in which Heidegger reflects and seeks to restore authentic thinking of Being creates an opening or opportunity for thought that is appropriated and applied by Caputo in his own attempt to salvage an interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. In this light, part two moves to explore the daring move made in the final chapter of *Heidegger and Aquinas*, wherein Caputo turns to the medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, to rethink the possibilities of Thomistic metaphysics after Heidegger. Here Caputo reinvigorates a certain "mystical element" in Heidegger which offers a quite non-Heideggerian and religious way around Thomism. Thus, the investigation will reveal a particular conversation or *way of reading*<sup>270</sup> that Caputo learns in his dialogues with Heidegger and the scholastics, which is formulated as a re-reading of the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. This re-reading as the second gesture is, therefore, already evident in the early Caputo before his own '*Kehre*' to Jacques Derrida.

When it has been made clear with respect to *Heidegger and Aquinas* that the double gesture does not 'close down' or 'end thinking' but opens up the matter (*Sache*) for thought in a new and productive way, we will be able to turn the analysis to Caputo's own critique of Heidegger carried out in the late 80's and the early 90's. For Caputo, it is the Heideggerian impulse – the *rhythmic impetus* – generated by fidelity to the matter of thought (and also for historical-biographical reasons) which obliges him to move beyond the discussion with the scholastics and to delimit a 'mythological' Heidegger in pursuit of a 'Heidegger demythologized.' Hence, the third part of the chapter will follow Caputo's re-reading of Heidegger that takes shape in his landmark study *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987)<sup>271</sup> and his full-blown reckoning in *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993).<sup>272</sup> According to Caputo, the later Heidegger became enamored by a mythological construal of Being that abandoned the impulse to resist a historical instantiation of Being (the early Greeks) for that which makes

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<sup>270</sup> This 'way of reading' is of course a foreshadowing of Derrida's "*d'une certaine manière*," that is, a movement or strategy of deconstruction, which is to emphasize: "the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually amounts to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way* [*d'une certaine manière*]." See Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2002), pg. 364, emphasis added.

<sup>271</sup> See John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>272</sup> See John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Being possible as such. This critique is mounted in no small thanks to the developments of French continental philosophy; in particular, the thought of Jean-François Lyotard, Emmanuel Levinas and most prominently, Jacques Derrida.

Beginning with *Radical Hermeneutics*, which is nothing short of Caputo's full philosophical statement of what we have been calling the 'double-gesture' conceived in terms of a re-working of hermeneutic phenomenology, we encounter inter-alia, a radical interpretation of *Being and Time* (1927).<sup>273</sup> In his reading, Caputo argues that Heidegger was never concerned with another account of Being in terms of the ontological distinction between Being and beings. Rather, Heidegger's deep concern was always with that which grants Being – the *meaning of Being*. Following Caputo's identification of Heidegger's radical hermeneutic claim on what is called the 'upon-which' (*das Woraufin*) – and which is later conceived in other terms like *Austrag*, *Es Gibt*, and *Ereignis* – he is able to stage an 'interplay' between Heidegger and Derrida, where the former is criticized with presenting an 'onto-hermeneutics' by the latter.

As alluded to, for reasons that are not only related to history and biography (Heidegger's dubious relationship to the Nationalist Socialists) but as a matter of philosophical importance, Caputo becomes disillusioned with the later Heidegger and decides to address this onto-hermeneutics head-on. In the concluding chapters of *Radical Hermeneutics* one can already see Caputo struggling to maintain Heidegger in light of Derrida's critique. However, if there is any uncertainty over his position, Caputo's reservations are nailed to the door as it were, in his final confrontation in *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993). In the final part of this chapter, then, we consider some of these elements which ultimately cause Caputo to depart from Heidegger's thought – though not without wanting to maintain his best insights – in favor of Derrida and the other French continental philosophers. With this last move, the chapter will have hoped to accomplish (1) an account of Caputo's attempt to overcome metaphysics (the first gesture) vis-à-vis Heidegger, (2) on this account by virtue of Heidegger's own method, to expose a way of reading (second gesture) that is marked by a re-reading, and (3) that this re-reading not only informs a reconstituting of Thomistic metaphysics on the one hand, and a 'demythologizing' of Heidegger on the other, but motivates his move to Derrida who provides the springboard for the remainder of his more explicit theological writing.

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<sup>273</sup> Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans.) *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).



The encounter between the early Caputo and the later Heidegger, therefore, will set the stage for the philosophical questions at stake in thinking about and through sovereignty. We could say here, preliminarily, that sovereignty will have moved from a thematization of 'political presence' (Schmitt) to a 'mythical-eschatology' or 'originary presence' (Heidegger) and finally to the 'event' (Derrida, Caputo).

## II. Heidegger's Critique of Scholasticism according to Caputo

Caputo announces that in 1927 "Everything had changed."<sup>274</sup> The preoccupations of the young Heidegger had moved from questions of logic and scholastic objectivism to phenomenological-existential investigations. Instead of the *Being of meaning* that occupied his early reflections,<sup>275</sup> the concern was now the *meaning of Being*. The latter for the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, could only be determined by an existential analytic which, in Caputo's words, would "work up the implicit understanding of Being embedded in the entirety of Dasein's concrete life."<sup>276</sup> The well-known result of this existential inversion was that the *meaning of the Being* of Dasein and therefore the *meaning of Being* itself, was to be understood in terms of temporality and care. By means of the existential analytic and the temporal analysis that followed, Heidegger was able to radically challenge the history of Being and metaphysics as it had been presented in the West; the 'onto-theo-logic' that elevates presence (*Vorhandensein, Anwesenheit, Präsenz*) and construes true being as a stationary and static 'now.'

This challenge, while only alluded to in *Being and Time*, is later taken up more fully with respect to medieval ontology<sup>277</sup> in *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (*The Basic Problems of*

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<sup>274</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 63.

<sup>275</sup> Caputo's first chapter, "Heidegger's Beginnings and the Project of a Dialogue with Scholasticism," which falls out of the scope of this study, is a detailed analysis of the young Heidegger before *Being and Time*. It traces both his biographical and philosophical developments, and is in its own right a significant piece of research in Heidegger studies. It covers his early relationship and concerns with Medieval scholasticism (in particular his *Habilitationsschrift* on Duns Scotus), Neo-Kantianism, Medieval mysticism and South German Catholicism in the work of Carl Braig. The reader is referred to it here for additional insight into the early Heidegger. See *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 15-61.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, pg. 64.

<sup>277</sup> It is worth mentioning that according to Caputo, Heidegger's critique of scholasticism is not isolated to Thomas Aquinas, but is rather scholasticism 'writ large.' In *Die Grundprobleme* he considers Aquinas, Scotus and Suárez, and speaks rather of a 'Thomistic school.' This is one of the few short-comings of Heidegger's reading of Thomistic metaphysics, and it is this failing that Caputo exploits to read Aquinas in a way that Heidegger's thought makes possible but itself never considers. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

*Phenomenology*, 1928)<sup>278</sup> and in the *Nietzsche* lectures of 1943.<sup>279</sup> In the former, both Greek and medieval ontology informing scholastic metaphysics essentially fail to think the origins of their own concepts, *essentia* and *exstentia*. These concepts are forgetful of the horizon in which they emerge, which is Dasein itself, the ‘uniquely existing individual,’ to quote Kierkegaard. Caputo writes, “Dasein has not *existentia*, but *Existenz*...*Existenz* signifies that which, being brought forth, stands outside of its causes.”<sup>280</sup> In this way, Dasein was reduced by scholasticism to the vocabulary of the ‘present-at-hand’ (*Hergestelltheit*). It was construed in an ontological character of ‘production’ that does not consider the distinct Heideggerian sense of the horizon in which Being appears as such. For Caputo, the real radicality of Heidegger’s critique of Thomism, however, – which creates a fateful distance between the early Greeks and the medieval – is launched in the *Nietzsche* lectures of 1943, *Identity and Difference* (1957),<sup>281</sup> the essay on “Language”<sup>282</sup> and *On Time and Being* (1969).<sup>283</sup> Caputo’s reading of this later Heidegger will be important on the one hand, for it elicits the central objects of metaphysical critique, and on the other hand, because these very texts provide not only the hermeneutic method – the *way of reading* – for Caputo’s re-writing of St. Thomas, but also because they harbor Heidegger’s problematic mythological-eschatological tendency. The latter is most clearly seen in his discussions of Anaximander, Heraclitus and Parmenides,<sup>284</sup> which Caputo later deconstructs in *Radical Hermeneutics* and *Demythologizing Heidegger*, respectively. We will take up each in turn.

### III. “Metaphysics as the History of Being”

Heidegger’s critique of scholasticism as presented by Caputo in the *Nietzsche* lectures focuses on the essay “Metaphysics as the History of Being.”<sup>285</sup> The emphasis of Heidegger’s later

<sup>278</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975). For the English translation see Martin Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

<sup>279</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* Vol.1 and Vol. 2 (Pfullingen: Verlag Günter Neske, 1961). For the English translation see Martin Heidegger, David Farrell Krell (trans.) *Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), Martin Heidegger, Joan Stambaugh (trans.) *The End of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>280</sup> Ibid, pg. 78.

<sup>281</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günter Neske, 1957). For the English translation see Martin Heidegger, Joan Stambaugh (trans.) *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969).

<sup>282</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1965). For the English translation see Martin Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) “Language” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), pp. 185-208.

<sup>283</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1969). For the English translation see Martin Heidegger, Joan Stambaugh (trans.) *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972)

<sup>284</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Der Spruch des Anaximander (1946)” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1963), Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1967). All the relevant chapters are found in the English translation by David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

<sup>285</sup> Heidegger, Stambaugh (trans.), *The End of Philosophy*, pp. 1-19.

position has now taken on a Being-historical shape. Here, the historical nature of Being is determined by Being's own withdrawal and therefore "What comes to presence in metaphysics, is a sequence of formations of Being, epochal shapes of Being in which we experience, not Being itself, but the 'Beingness' (*Seiendheit*) of beings."<sup>286</sup> Whatever metaphysical formations of Being we may experience — will, mind, spirit, etc — these progressive 'histories of metaphysics' are made possible not by our own reflections about reality, but by Beings own historical concealment of its truth. In the present, for example, the latest manifestation of metaphysics according to Heidegger is "actuality," which is translated from Latin into German with "*Wirklichkeit*," and as such denotes working, production and causality. The important development in Heidegger's thought at this stage, is that the prescription of the essence of metaphysics in the distinction between 'thatness' (*existentia*) and 'whatness' (*essentia*) is no longer traced to Dasein's projective understanding of Being, but to the self-disclosure of Being in the early Greeks. We will discuss this in more detail below, but in short, the early Greeks (here still Plato and Aristotle) had a primordial experience of Being as pure presencing. For the Heidegger of the *Nietzsche* lectures, the sense of *εργα* (work) in Aristotle, still retains what Caputo will call its 'alethiological' character, that is, its verbal-sense before it contracts into the permanent presence of *οὐσία*.

As just mentioned, the medieval scholastic phase of Heidegger's interpretation of the history of metaphysics involves the fateful translation of *εργα* into *actualis*, where the Greek sense of primordial presencing is almost totally covered over. Being as *actualis* is that which is actual, what has been made, and therefore stands outside of its causes. It has the same connotation with *ex-sistere*, literally 'stepping outside.' Heidegger traces this manifestation of Being persisting in the modern period to the language of the Roman Empire. Caputo writes:

The medieval Christian conception of Being in terms of making and what is made is articulated in a language which belongs to the people of making and doing. The 'Roman Church' is not just an historical appellation. It points to an inner harmony between Christian metaphysics and the metaphysics of making, which come together in the conception of Being as *Wirklichkeit*. Our tradition then is more Roman than Greek.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 81.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 89.

With this comment, Caputo makes clear how he understands the continuity between scholastic thought and the (Roman) Christian tradition. Both are tied, according to Heidegger, to a rendering of reality that emphasizes actuality through the central feature of the principle of causality. Being is that which brings into permanence or into actuality and since nothing can bring God into presence, he is himself pure-presence, permanence itself. But, as Caputo writes, “this self-persisting being (*für sich Bestehendes*) is the *summum ens* [supreme being] and as such the *summum bonum* [supreme good], which makes Him the cause of causes.”<sup>288</sup> The God of scholasticism for Heidegger and Caputo is a figure with causal meaning; it is a God who effects and as the ultimate Being it effectuates being. This Roman and later medieval scholastic legacy of metaphysics and the God that embodies it is always in the background of Caputo’s theological project, for example, he writes in *Weakness of God* (2006): “Suppose we imagine God, not as a prime mover unmoved, but as removed from the order of the cosmic movements of cosmological explanation, removed from the onto-causal order altogether, from being, presence, power, and causality?”<sup>289</sup>

Before turning to Caputo’s reading of *Identity and Difference*, we must pause here to briefly highlight this ‘being-historical’ significance, which will be developed in what is labelled below as Heidegger’s ‘mythical-eschatology.’ Caputo draws us to two significant re-workings of Heidegger’s earlier position in the *Grundprobleme* of 1928 which appear in the *Nietzsche* lectures of 1941. Both point to a conception of history that is profoundly mythological and which desires an eschaton to inaugurate ‘the new.’ The first, as can be detected in our discussion above, is the sharpness of the scholastic critique that seems to outweigh that of the Greeks. Indeed, in the *Nietzsche* lectures Heidegger now sees a greater distance between the Greeks and the scholastics. The Greeks (Aristotle and Plato) are closer to a primordial experience of Being than the scholastics, they are the “great origin” of the West.<sup>290</sup> Whereas before the scholastics were a continuation of this tradition, they are now seen as the distorters of it.<sup>291</sup> There is, therefore, in 1941 an abyss starting to open up between these dispensations of Being.

This historical sensitivity leads into the next significant re-working in the *Nietzsche* lectures, namely, the very nature of the history of metaphysics itself. In the *Grundprobleme* the conception of scholastic metaphysics was largely transcendental. The scholastic

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., pg. 90.

<sup>289</sup> John D. Caputo, *Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pg. 36.

<sup>290</sup> Caputo, Heidegger and Aquinas, pg. 93.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., pg. 92.

understanding of Being was taken from Dasein's projection of Being in terms of a certain hermeneutical horizon, and it was the categories of this horizon — *essentia* and *existentia* — which were too 'narrow' and thus unable to account for the Being of Dasein, viz. they lacked "an appreciation of the Being of *Existenz*."<sup>292</sup> *Essentia* and *existentia* have only a limited validity in the early Heidegger, but in 1941 they become a part of a history of Being that masks and covers over a more 'original' emergence and primordial experience in the early Greeks.<sup>293</sup> In short, this covering over is a 'forgetfulness' of that which grants Being, it is an inauguration of *Seinsvergessenheit*. The accent will be placed no longer on the phenomenological in terms of a transcendental hermeneutic, but rather on the 'history of Being' as a movement of concealment and un-concealment (the *a-lethic* quality), which constitutes a '*Destruktion*' of the history of ontology. As we will see, this will start to negatively crystalize in an eschatological desire for an originary experience of Being. It is into the fabric of this history that Caputo situates his most important insights of Heidegger, those that will terminate in the critique of scholasticism and begin the Caputoian critique of Heidegger. In order to address the emerging limitations that Caputo announces in the 1980s, we must first take up the further development of Heidegger's critique which gives rise to it.

#### IV. *Identity and Difference*

Moving to the radical elements of Heidegger's critique in *Identity and Difference* requires two preparatory steps that frame Caputo's entire discussion; the first in relation to his presentation of the French Thomist, Étienne Gilson and the second to his reading of Aquinas himself. As mentioned above, a part of Caputo's motivation for *Heidegger and Aquinas* was to address an interpretation of Aquinas which, if accurate, would allow greater resonance between Heidegger and Aquinas and their respective conceptions of Being. The major work which created this possibility was Gilson's *Being and Some Philosophers* (1949).<sup>294</sup> As a medieval historian, Gilson's book was an attempt to distinguish between Thomism and scholasticism *historically* — "by a concrete hermeneutic of the history of Western metaphysics"<sup>295</sup> — where

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid., pg. 94.

<sup>293</sup> While Heidegger is here, according to Caputo, dismissing the possibility of a Transcendental Thomism, or rather that Thomism is 'naïve' of the need to establish the question of Being from a transcendental standpoint, Caputo does note the scholarship that has tried to take up this challenge. For example, Joseph Maréchal's *Le point de départ de la métaphysique* (1922-47), Karl Rahner "The Concept of Existential Philosophy in Heidegger" in *Philosophy Today* (1969), Johannes Baptist Lotz, *Martin Heidegger and Thomas Aquinas* (1975) and Emerich Coreth's *Metaphysics* (1968). For Heidegger, however, it seems his critique has simply 'moved on.' He is now more concerned with scholasticism as a 'species of *Seinsvergessenheit*.' See, Ibid., pg. 95.

<sup>294</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952).

<sup>295</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 100.

scholasticism is taken pejoratively. For Gilson, there is a genuine “existential metaphysics” of Being in Aquinas that moves beyond being to Being, where Being is taken in its pure-act of Being (*esse*). Being draws non-being into Being, it is a being “in virtue of a rising up and emerging into Being which is the very act of Be-ing.”<sup>296</sup> Such a conception of Being, for Gilson, is far removed accordingly, to the “essentialism” of much of contemporary Thomism that forecloses this existential act by turning it into a ‘whatness’ or an ‘essence.’ On this account, it would appear that Heidegger’s charge of *Seinsvergessenheit* is ill-conceived with respect to Aquinas’s thought, since Being is not taken for granted but thought in-itself.

After generously staging Gilson’s interpretation of Aquinas,<sup>297</sup> Caputo still asks whether Aquinas, despite giving special priority to the metaphysics of *esse* over *ens* – that is, an “existential” metaphysics as opposed to an “essentialist” one – is not simply conducting an inversion which takes place *within* metaphysics, and which does not truly take the Heideggerian ‘step-back.’ To test this, Caputo goes on to present his own reading of Aquinas’s metaphysics of *esse*.<sup>298</sup> Through a delineation of Aquinas’s understanding of the metaphysics of participation, Caputo follows Gilson’s lead by outlining the primacy of *esse* over *ens* and demonstrates Aquinas’s deep awareness of the Heideggerian ontological distinction despite having been thought in Latinized terms which might suggest otherwise (*actus* and *potentia*). However, even if Aquinas language of *esse* – as *esse subsistens* in which the being, *esse participata*, participates – does not accord, as is quite clearly evident with Heidegger’s sense of Being (*Sein*), where Being cannot ever emerge without beings, the question is still raised as to whether Aquinas ever thought what ‘gives’ this distinction. It is to this question that Caputo leads into Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference*, a crucial step in the displacement of the claim that Aquinas avoids a historical ‘naiveté’ in the history of Being.

One of the most important themes in the later Heidegger which emerges in *Identity and Difference*, as the title suggests, is the notion of ‘dif-ference’ or *Austrag*.<sup>299</sup> *Austrag* names a depth dimension to the history of the ontological difference. While this history consistently moves about and ‘thinks’ in the distinction (Being-being, *Esse-ens*), what is not ‘thought’ is the ‘unthought thought’ of the difference which makes this distinction possible. The ‘naiveté’ of

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid., pp.115-116.

<sup>297</sup> See chapter three, “Gilson’s critique of metaphysics” in *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 100-121.

<sup>298</sup> See chapter four, “*Esse* and the Metaphysics of Participation in Thomas Aquinas” in *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 122-146.

<sup>299</sup> Below we will continue to refer to *Austrag* in the original German as it retains the verbal sense of ‘austragen’ to literally ‘carry away from.’ It is the literal translation of the Latin ‘dif-ferre’ and ‘dif-ferens.’ See Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 151.



Aquinas was to have moved within the distinction and not to have attained its origin – “the ‘essence’ (*Wesen*) of metaphysics in the verbal sense of its originative rising up.”<sup>300</sup>

How does one attain this origin? What does it mean to take the ‘step back’ from Being and beings and from difference ‘to face’ (*das Gegenüber*) difference? Heidegger says that in this ‘step back’ we can say, “the Being of beings means Being which is being”<sup>301</sup> (*Sein des Seienden heißt: Sein, welches das Seiende ist*).<sup>302</sup> Being as the genitive of the difference ‘being’, passes over to beings – it is in a ‘transition’ (*übergehend*). As Caputo describes, “Being gives itself over to being, comes to pass in and as beings, discloses itself, reveals itself, ‘unconceals’ itself in being.”<sup>303</sup> But just as Being ‘is’ the process of “coming-over” (*Überkommenis*) to beings, beings are not pre-existing waiting for Being, they emerge in this coming over, they “arrive” (*ankunft*) in Being’s un-concealment of itself. Caputo commentates further, “[a]nd just as the coming-over of Being is the revelation of beings, so the arrival of beings is the concealment of Being.”<sup>304</sup> This dynamism is but a single process that Heidegger calls the *Unter-Schied*, the ‘differentiation’ between Being and beings. In this differentiating – the “coming-over” of Being and the concomitant “arrival” of beings – the two are held together and at the same time kept apart, which in German reads “*auseinander-zueinander getragen*.”<sup>305</sup> The latter is what Heidegger refers to when he uses the word *Austrag*. *Austrag*, therefore, names the difference in the difference between Being and beings, and as such moves the ontological difference to a depth dimension that Thomism simply doesn’t conceive. In the reading of Aquinas that sees a genuine metaphysics of *esse* (Gilson), metaphysics still operates at the level of the *Differenz* between Being and beings, and does not think that which provides the distinction opening up the nature of the difference.

Important to ‘overcoming metaphysics,’ deconstructing it, and moving ‘beyond’ it in Caputo’s thought, is also to recognize the context of Heidegger’s text, namely, his discussion with reference to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1816). Part of Heidegger’s task in this text is to highlight the “Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics” in Hegel. Without being able to fully explore Heidegger’s argument, we can say precipitously that Heidegger reads the Being which is given over by the difference in Hegel’s *Logic* as a “ground.” Being comes over as

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., pg. 150.

<sup>301</sup> Heidegger, Stambaugh (trans.), *Identity and Difference*, pg. 64.

<sup>302</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe: I. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910-1976, Band 11: Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 2006), pp. 70-71.

<sup>303</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 151.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, Identität und Differenz*, pg. 71.

ground to beings who, consequently, arrive as the “grounded.” On the one hand, the *onto*-logical nature of metaphysics arises and is constituted because beings are thought with reference to Being as ground, and on the other, the *theo*-logical nature arises when metaphysics thinks being as a whole, that is, in reference to a highest being.<sup>306</sup> It is not difficult to see how God enters metaphysics on these terms, namely, as the ground which grounds the grounded. The reference to the principle of causality is unmistakable here and is, therefore, just as applicable to Aquinas’s *esse subsistens* and *esse participatum*. It effectively mirrors Heidegger’s framing of Hegel.<sup>307</sup>

Before moving to Caputo’s reading of Heidegger’s essay on “Language,” a remark is worth noting which expresses the implications of this critique of scholasticism for Caputo’s treatment of metaphysics in general and for his later theological project in particular. It serves a certain foreshadowing and at the same time lends credence to the profound influence of the later Heidegger for the early Caputo. In an oft quoted piece of text from *Identity and Difference* to which Caputo briefly alludes,<sup>308</sup> Heidegger writes:

the cause as *causa sui*. This is the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god. *The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as causa sui, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.* Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit.<sup>309</sup>

What we see here in Heidegger, though it is something he will not pursue, is precisely the opening-up of thought about God that does not end with the ‘death of God.’ The end of the “god of philosophy” does not end talk about God, but indeed, may open us up to a thinking that is ‘closer to the divine God.’<sup>310</sup> This is the essential task of Caputo’s later theology; to

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 155, 157.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., pg. 153.

<sup>309</sup> Heidegger, Stambaugh (trans.) *Identity and Difference*, pg. 72. Emphasis added.

<sup>310</sup> See also Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, ‘Beyond categories, proper names, types and norms toward a fragile openness (Offen-barkeit) of *différance*, but always from within the text,’ *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 68:1 (2012), where he writes that Heidegger’s later critique “wounds metaphysical God-talk,” but that “Heidegger never believed this to be the end of God-talk, but the possibility of beginning - a beginning for a God-talk (metaphysics) that is fully aware of (awakened to) its limitations.” Pg. 2. See also Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk: A conversation between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida*, *Studies in Philosophical Theology* 52 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

respond to the ‘death’ of the onto-theological god of metaphysics by conceiving God not as a cause but as an event. It is this implicit move in Heidegger’s thought with respect to God that imprints profoundly on Caputo’s writing both here in *Heidegger and Aquinas* and throughout his corpus. We will come to describe it below as the ‘double-gesture’, ‘way of reading’ or in Heidegger’s terms the ‘step-back.’

## V. “Language”

Of central importance to the critique of scholasticism has to do with the ‘linguistic character’ of the *Austrag*. Caputo writes in this vein that “the dif-fering in the difference which belongs to all metaphysics, including the metaphysics of St. Thomas, is an essentially linguistic event.”<sup>311</sup> Pointing to another late-Heidegger text simply titled, “Language,”<sup>312</sup> Caputo draws attention to the terms of scholasticism which are themselves confounded by the Latin language in which they appear. Heidegger’s critique now extends not only to metaphysical descriptions of Being, but more broadly to the Western tradition of language writ-large. Unlike traditional conceptions which determine meaning as an interiority and then simply communicated *by means of language*, Heidegger’s theory of language gives primacy to language itself, that is, to quote a famous phrase from *The Letter on Humanism* (1946): “Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell.”<sup>313</sup> Meaning arises in and from language. Language is, therefore, not something we ‘do’ in the sense of simply communicating meaning, but rather something that happens to us in response to Being and which manifests itself in human speech.

In relation to the discussion above about the *Austrag* or dif-ference, this ‘manifestative’ character of language needs to be further explored. If language for Heidegger is not about human speech but about that which gives rise to human speech, we can also say that it is that which brings into *presence*, “it does not represent beings but lets them emerge into presence.”<sup>314</sup> In this particular essay, what emerges into presence is read in terms of the distinction between “things” (sky, ground, moral, divine) and “world,” which taken together make up Heidegger’s famous notion of the “fourfold” (*Geviert*). The naming of these various elements in the poem by Georg Trakl – “A Winter Evening” – constitutes one and the same time “the way in which

<sup>311</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 158.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-167. See Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1965). English translation: Martin Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) “Language” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), pp. 185-208.

<sup>313</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Brief über den Humanismus” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Vitorrio Klostermann GmbH, 1967). English translation: Martin Heidegger, William McNeil (ed.) “Letter on Humanism” in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pg. 239.

<sup>314</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 159.

things give birth to the world and the way in which the world makes it possible for things to be things.”<sup>315</sup> This character of language in the poem, therefore, is structurally parallel to the *Austrag*: it is the holding together-apart (*auseinander-zueinander tragen*), the ‘coming over’ and the ‘arrival’ of Being (world) and beings (things). The poetic speech as *Austrag* is the difference which gives rise to the difference. Or put another way, the difference/*Austrag* requires the linguistic character of the poetic speech to bring the world into being. Crucially, the poetic speech does not strictly ‘say’ anything, it rather silently calls world and thing into the difference which is what they are in their presence as human language.

Language for Heidegger summons/calls human speech as a pre-linguistic or originary linguistic event. It is linguistic not in the sense that it “happens *in* language but in the sense that it is the happening *of* language.”<sup>316</sup> This pre-linguistic essence of language (difference/*Austrag*) structures and gives shape to the various epochs of language formation, whether Greek, Latin or German. What this means for Aquinas’s metaphysics of *esse* is simply that it is *contained* by its Latin language. It remains totally oblivious to the call of language to which it is a response. For Heidegger and Caputo, Aquinas the medieval grammarian, “takes the form of meaning which he articulates to be an eternal structure which itself reflects the eternal truths of metaphysics. He is oblivious of the historical character of all linguistic formation.”<sup>317</sup>

## VI. The ‘Ereignis’ in “Time and Being”

One of the salient (fateful) shifts in Heidegger’s later writing is his move from the temporality of Dasein in *Being and Time* to the historical relation between Dasein and being; from “being and time” to “being and history.” At the end of *Being and Time* Heidegger implicitly states that the temporality of Dasein is perhaps the horizon of Being.<sup>318</sup> This sets into motion the critique that Being is not the ground or cause of time. Thus, in the later Heidegger we see an increasing move to ‘overcome’, go ‘beyond’ or ‘step-back’ out from the metaphysics of Being, as well as from his own fundamental ontology of Being that he was seeking in *Being and Time*. In “Time and Being”, therefore, as Joan Stambaugh writes in the introduction to her translation of this essay, “Heidegger is groping his way out of metaphysics.”<sup>319</sup> The galvanizing ‘concept’ around

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid., pg. 160.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., pg. 161-162.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., pg. 166.

<sup>318</sup> Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans.) *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pg. 488.

<sup>319</sup> Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pg. x.

which this takes place, and which Caputo calls “The Archimedean point of every fundamental Heideggerian theme,”<sup>320</sup> is the word *Ereignis*. Following the analysis of Caputo’s reading of *Ereignis* below, we will be in a position to see, first, the consummation of the critique of Thomistic scholasticism and secondly, the historical relation between being and history that is conceived in an ever increasing eschatological-mythological constellation.

Heidegger begins his lecture by describing a constancy in the relationship between Being and time, namely, presence or presencing (*Anwesen*). Being in Western thought has always meant what ‘is’, what is present (*Gegenwart*) in time. The character of Being is determined by time. On the other hand, time is always passing away and does so constantly. Time constantly remains passing away. Therefore, “[t]o remain means: not to disappear, thus, to presence. Thus, time is determined by a kind of Being.”<sup>321</sup> Being in terms of time and time in terms of Being are, as such, reciprocally determined, yet cannot be addressed by one another. Being is not a thing *in* time and therefore not temporal, and nor is time a being. In these “contradictory statements,” Heidegger is intent not on dialectical sublimation which unites in a higher truth, but rather in changing the accent of the middle term “presence” to “letting-presence” (*Anwesenlassen*). By this he means to think Being and time in terms of that which gives Being and time – ‘letting’ them be. He wants to think *behind* Being and time to the ‘It’ which ‘gives’.

The sense of ‘granting’ (*Geben*) presence or ‘letting’ presence should not be understood, Caputo reminds, as a kind of ‘making’ or causality that we have seen above with respect to scholasticism. Indeed, “in Aquinas Being is not thought as un-concealing, the bestowal of presence, but – unlike in Heidegger – in terms of giving actuality, effecting actual status.”<sup>322</sup> The history of metaphysics is the history of the un-concealing of Being by virtue of the “It” which ‘sends’ (*Schicken*) or gives Being even as it, itself, is self-concealing.<sup>323</sup> This history of metaphysics as an apportioned sense of Being in each historical epoch, has been traced by

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<sup>320</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 167. The concept of *Ereignis* is notoriously difficult and as Daniela Vallega-Neu writes, “the writings in which he [Heidegger] actually develops this concept were not meant for ‘the public ear’; they were texts written without didactic considerations in an attempt at an originary (poietic) language, a language one may call ‘experimental’ or ‘esoteric’ (in the literal sense)”. See Daniela Vallega-Neu, “*Ereignis*: the event of appropriation” in Bret W. Davis (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), pg. 140, and pp.140-154 where Vallega-Neu traces the complete development of the concept that takes on various emphases. For other helpful explications see Daniel O. Dahlstrom, *The Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 17-19, and J.L. Metha, *Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), pp. 430-444.

<sup>321</sup> Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pg. 3.

<sup>322</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 169.

<sup>323</sup> “A giving which gives only its gifts, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws, such a giving we will call sending. According to the meaning of giving which is to be thought in this way, Being – that which It gives – is what is sent.” Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pg. 8.

Heidegger from the doctrine of *ovovta* in Plato and Aristotle, to *actus* in Aquinas, *res cogitans* in the Enlightenment, the will to power in Nietzsche and in the most extreme concealment in modern times the “stuff to be calculated and manipulated.”<sup>324</sup>

If the “It” which gives Being clearly evinces a *historical* sending, then the question becomes: is it time which gives Being? Or to put it another way, what is time “in its peculiarity in the light of what was said about Being,” Being as presencing and ‘letting-be-present’?<sup>325</sup> If we think about presence and what is present, Heidegger says, we think at the same time about the past and the future in relation to a now. This is the standard way in which we conceive time. However, if time were thought of in terms of presencing as opposed to a succession of ‘nows,’ it would need to be related to the way in which presence ‘approaches’ or is extended to the human being. There are three ways that this takes place according to Heidegger. First, presence is extended to us in the present. But, secondly, presence is also encountered outside of the present in the presence of the absence of the ‘having-been’ and, thirdly, the presence of the absence of the ‘not-yet.’ “The present then is not the now but the space which has been opened up between the having-been and the future; it is rife with the presence of what has been and is coming toward us.”<sup>326</sup> In this threefold extending of presence, as a conception of time, an opening (*Offene*) is cleared (*sich lichten*) for presence, and it is this “mutual interplay” which Heidegger calls “the near.” The near holds these dimensions together while at the same time keeps them apart. It is, therefore, the near which gives time “for it holds the time-space open by preserving what is refused in the having-been and by preserving what is withheld in the arrival of the future.”<sup>327</sup> What is concluded at this point in the lecture, then, is that both being and time ‘are’ not, they are *given*.

The source of the giving of Being as presence and of the giving of time as the temporal opening is now called the *Ereignis*. *Ereignis*, as Daniela Vallega-Neu notes, in German usually means ‘event’, but Heidegger is experimenting more with its semantic possibilities. The prefix *er-* “carries the sense of a beginning or of an achievement” and *-eignis* which comes from *eigen*, means “own.” There is also the sense of *eigentlich* translating the words “proper” or “authentic.” Given these semantic nuances the word is either left untranslated or most frequently rendered, “enowning,” “appropriation” or “the event of appropriation.”<sup>328</sup> But

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<sup>324</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 170.

<sup>325</sup> Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>326</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 171.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 171.

<sup>328</sup> Daniela Vallega-Neu, “*Ereignis*: the event of appropriation” in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, pp. 140-41.



what is the *Ereignis*? The *ereignis* is strictly not a thing at all, not given as a proposition but as a dedication of Time and Being delivered into their own natures but also held together delivered over to each other. Caputo's explication of *Ereignis* draws on the Indian philosopher Jarava Metha, who writes:

In both these ways of granting, sending forth and extending, there is evident a dedicating, an entrusting – of Being as presence and of Time as the realm of the open – of each to the other in what is their very own. What thus determines both Time and Being, in their very own, that is, in their mutual belongingness, is the *Ereignis*. That which lets both matters (*Sachen*, Being and Time) belong together, which not only brings them into their own inmost nature but preserves and holds them in their togetherness, is the *Ereignis*, the relationship of the holding together of these two.<sup>329</sup>

Caputo ends his discussion of “Time and Being” by once again returning to the historical character of the *Ereignis* and its bearing on the thought of Aquinas. For Caputo, it is clear that Aquinas does not make the “historical reduction” which thinks the tradition as a tradition. Instead, as a medieval thinker, he is caught in the history of the tradition delivered over to him by *Ereignis*. But it is not simply the ahistorical nature of metaphysics in scholasticism that is at issue, for even Hegel's sense of history is metaphysical. What is at stake in these conceptions of history is the ability to see “that all metaphysical thought arises from a withdrawal, that every account of ‘Being’ has a deeper source.”<sup>330</sup> In this way, the character of the *Seinsvergessenheit* becomes clearer. The ‘oblivion of Being’ is not the forgetfulness of Being, but the oblivion and forgetfulness of the difference/*Austrag*/*Ereignis* that bestows and constitutes the history of metaphysics.

To awaken to the oblivion of the difference/*Austrag*/*Ereignis* would not mean to be unaffected by the withdrawal in each historical epoch, but precisely to preserve the oblivion: “this awakening, not an extinguishing of the oblivion of Being, but placing oneself in it and the standing within it. Thus, the awakening from the oblivion of Being to the oblivion of Being is the awakening into Appropriation [*Ereignis*].”<sup>331</sup> To be awakened to the *Ereignis* is to be aware of the ineradicable withdrawal which belongs to its very structure. This kind of

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<sup>329</sup> J.L. Metha, *Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision*, pg. 437.

<sup>330</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 175.

<sup>331</sup> Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, pg. 30.

historical sensitivity — the reduction, which sees the metaphysical giving of an epoch as a result of a withdrawal — is not thought in Aquinas. The best we can hope for in Aquinas, Caputo declares, is that perhaps there is a proximity to a primordial and pristine experience of presencing in the metaphysics of *esse* that is related to the way Being was granted to the Early Greeks before it congealed into steadfast actuality.<sup>332</sup>

### III. The Mystical Element in Thomas Aquinas

In the encounter with Heidegger's critique of scholasticism as portrayed by Caputo, we have attempted to sketch the character of the first gesture in Caputo's reading of Martin Heidegger. In dialogue with Aquinas, this gesture is portrayed with increasing skepticism toward the tenants of 'onto-theo-logic' on display not only in Aquinas but also in the history of the Western philosophical tradition. In particular, we have seen the way in which Being as 'presencing' experienced by the early Greeks is congealed into *actualis* in scholastic metaphysics, obscuring the origin of a primordial experience and thus inaugurating *Seinsvergessenheit*. In addition, we also saw in the discussion of the *Austrag* or difference that the metaphysical distinction between Being and beings fails to think the difference which gives rise to it. In the context of Heidegger's discussion with Hegel, this led to the observation that God enters into metaphysics as the ground which grounds and thus marks the principle of causality as central to this critique. The discussion of the *Austrag* also assigned importance to its linguistic character as that which does not happen *in* language but is the happening *of* language — the 'event' of language. The metaphysics of *esse* is oblivious to the call of language to which it is a response. The project of overcoming metaphysics, therefore, has the history of Western language also in its purview. Finally, the critique of metaphysics terminates in the organizing concept of *Ereignis*, where the formal distinction between "being and history" — the underlying thematic of these later writings — becomes most acute.

In the following section this critique comes full circle. Picking up from the withdrawal of *Ereignis* which constitutes the epochal sendings of Being, Caputo returns to the early Greeks in another set of late Heidegger texts. The early Greeks (the so-called 'pre-Socratics' or 'Eleatics') though unaware and innocent of the *Ereignis*, nonetheless also have an experience of Being in its 'original' (*anfänglich*) quality before it is "victimized by Western *ratio*."<sup>333</sup> It is in

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<sup>332</sup> Caputo, Heidegger and Aquinas, pp. 176-180.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., pg. 185.

Heidegger's 'step back' to the Greeks that an opening is created for Caputo in which to re-read the Thomistic metaphysics of *esse*. For, according to Caputo, if it is possible for the early Greeks to still have an experience of the gift of presence despite being innocent of the *Ereignis*, it might be just the same for the metaphysics of *esse* in Thomas Aquinas.

The latter move will be seen not only as an opportunity to salvage a reading of scholastic metaphysics in general or Aquinas in particular, but also seen as a fundamental Heideggerian component of Caputo's thought which elicits a *way of reading* that does not close down the matter for thought, but sees it as an opportunity to think thought anew. For, as deconstructive thought would have it, it is precisely these historical-mythological texts that provide the impetus both for re-reading Aquinas, and later initiating the project of re-reading Heidegger himself – producing a Heidegger that is 'demythologized.'

## I. The Early Greeks: Anaximander

The task for Caputo in reading Heidegger on the early Greeks is to consolidate the ways in which they experienced the primordial presencing of Being. Despite the fact that each of these infamous fragments make up not more than one or two sentences, they remain 'truncated monuments of thinking' in the history of Western thought and therefore contain, as David Krell writes, "a remnant of an exhilarating presence."<sup>334</sup> It is in search of this exhilarating presence that Heidegger conducts his historical retrieval and semantic inquiry.

The fragment of Anaximander of Miletus (c. 610-546 B.C.E.) reads as follows: "But that from which things rise also gives rise to their passing away, according to what is necessary; for things render justice and pay penalty to one another for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time."<sup>335</sup> The focus for Heidegger here is the 'rise' and the 'passing away' (*Auf- und Untergehen*), recalling the 'coming-over' (*Überkommenis*) of Being to beings and the 'arrival' (*An-kunft*) of beings that we saw above with respect to the *Austrag*. The lingering (*ver-weilt*) of this transitional process (*Übergang*) and the emergence of presence into absence as a twofold movement is a juncture or joining that represents justice. "The juncture is the space which is cleared on the one end by rising up and on the other end by passing away and within which

<sup>334</sup> Martin Heidegger, David F. Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (trans.), *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), pg. 5.

<sup>335</sup> Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, pg. 20. This translation appears to be Heidegger's own. He starts the essay by quoting Nietzsche's translation and that of Hermann Diels, which differ slightly.

what is present emerges into presence."<sup>336</sup> *In*-justice is interpreted, therefore, as the *persistence* which resists the twofold movement of justice and tries to contain it. Heidegger writes, "It strikes a willful pose of persistence, no longer concerning itself with whatever else is present."<sup>337</sup>

The source of the lingering (justice) is found in the preceding phrase, "according to necessity" (*κατα τα χρεων*). Heidegger here interprets the preposition *κατα* in conjunction with *χρεων* as a depiction of the lower beings coming into Being. 'According to *χρεων* or necessity' means that which "grants to beings their manner of arrival, names the matter to be thought, which is the Being of beings."<sup>338</sup> *Χρεων* in the early Greeks names the distinction between Being and beings but does not name the difference as such. Like the comments made about *Ereignis*, the difference remains in oblivion, but the originality of the early Greeks is that they experience Being 'pristinely' as presencing and beings as what is present. *Χρεων*, according to Heidegger, leaves a 'trace' of the distinction, a trace of *Ereignis*, for which we have to closely listen before it fades into the history of Western metaphysics.

## II. Heraclitus and Parmenides

The Greek word that receives the most scrutiny in the Heraclitian fragment<sup>339</sup> is *logos*. In contrast to classical formulations of *logos* that look to notions of unity, necessity, and order, Heidegger proposes a subversive reading. Heidegger translates the fragment as follows: "When you have listened not to me but to the Meaning [logos], it is wise with the same Meaning [logos] to say: *One* is All."<sup>340</sup> Logos is the 'One' (*εν*) which gathers together what is present and releases it into unconcealment.

For Caputo, this interpretation of logos is brought in line with what was said about *χρεων*; "the *λογος* is what gathers things together into the juncture, which selects things for appearance in the juncture and holds back the disjointed [injustice]. As such it is what sends each thing into its appointed place and lets it come to presence in its due and apportioned time."<sup>341</sup> However, this conception of logos Heidegger says, was experienced by Heraclitus as

<sup>336</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 189.

<sup>337</sup> Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, pg. 42.

<sup>338</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 190.

<sup>339</sup> See Heidegger, chapter two, "Logos (Heraclitus, Fragment B 50)" in *Early Greek Thinking*, pp. 59-78.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., pg. 59.

<sup>341</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 195.

a momentary flash of light. No sooner had Heraclitus experienced Being as a distinction between Being and being – the distinction *qua* distinction – did this light become darkness once again. Heraclitus, therefore, also leaves traces in logos of the originary presencing of presence but does not think what gives it as such.

A similar argument is made with references to Parmenides.<sup>342</sup> Heidegger is in the first instance interested in Parmenides use of the word *εον*. For him the word refers both and at the same time to the ‘duality’ (*Zwiefalt*) or ‘two-fold’ of Being and beings. Parmenides hints at this duality but does not state it explicitly, it thus falls into oblivion. But to what exactly does this duality in the word *εον* involve? Caputo explains that the coming to pass of this duality, for Parmenides, is connected in Heidegger’s interpretation to the ‘belonging together’ of Being and thought. Indeed, Being and thought are ‘the same’ (*το αὐτο*) insofar as “thinking (*νοεῖν*) is grounded in and comes to presence from gathering (*λεγεῖν*).”<sup>343</sup> *Eon* thus refers to Being and thought as the gathering of what is present into presence, which means the ‘two-fold’ or duality is that which opens up the difference between presence and what is present.

The second word which Heidegger hones in on in the Parmenides fragment is *μοῖρα*, which Heidegger translates as the “apportioning” (*Zuteilung*); that which dispenses presence to that which is present. Caputo connects *μοῖρα* with *χρεων* in the Anaximander fragment, intimating that both refer to the dispensation of Being to beings, that is, the sense of fateful sending of each thing to its manner and measure of presence. *Μοῖρα*, thus, also speaks to the “it gives” which sends Being to being, unfolds the distinction (two-fold) but remains itself concealed.

These series of essays, the semantic investigations and phenomenological descriptions they carry out, all share the similar *process* that describes a rising up of presence into what is present or the emergence of things into unconcealment (*αληφεια*) before receding into concealment (*ληφεια*). This originary process is particular heightened in the Early Greeks for Heidegger and replaces, according to Caputo, the earlier ‘phenomenological’ readings in *Being and Time* that Heidegger came to consider as too closely aligned with transcendental subjectivity. Caputo calls these readings ‘alethiological,’ “a more radical, non-subjectivist way of savoring the being in its Being, of allowing it to emerge on its own and from out of its own resources.”<sup>344</sup> Before we consider how these readings in particular become increasingly problematic for

<sup>342</sup> See Heidegger, chapter three, “Moirai (Parmenides VIII, 34-41)” in *Early Greek Thinking*, pp. 59-78.

<sup>343</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 196.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 198.

Caputo, let us first turn to the opening they create for re-interpreting Aquinas and the metaphysics of *esse*.

### III. Re-reading the Metaphysics of *Esse*

Caputo argues that Aquinas's metaphysics of *esse* does not fit within the framework of Heideggerian alethiology due to its 'realistic' and 'causal' conceptualization. On the one hand, Thomistic realism refers *esse* to the act by which *ens* comes to be real and present. It is an abstraction that does not pick up the sense of 'presencing' in the early Greeks. It is imagined as an 'objective presence' (*Vorhandensein*) utterly unaffected by *Dasein*. On the other hand, Thomistic 'actualism' or causality also do not accord with Heideggerian alethiology. The metaphysics of *esse* which conceives God as *actus purus* takes being not *as* Being, but as something created and caused in terms of an act, efficiency or force. Thomism sees the artist as someone who *makes* something, not as someone who *shows* something, "Greek thought is epiphanic; Thomistic thought is causal."<sup>345</sup> In the final analysis, then, Caputo concludes that the metaphysics of *esse* is not granted a privileged experience of Being as presencing, and thus, Thomistic scholasticism is consigned to the tradition of metaphysics which falls into the oblivion of Being.

Caputo's final chapter in *Heidegger and Aquinas* is a response to this supposed dead-end for Thomistic scholasticism. There he makes a suggestion that draws on medieval mysticism and the apophatic tradition which is significant for the central claim of our argument in this chapter. Caputo attempts a retrieval of Thomistic metaphysics that draws its hermeneutic impetus from Heidegger, opening a re-reading of Aquinas and setting forth a distinct *way of reading* that will issue in a departure of Heidegger himself. As such, the concern is not so much with the accuracy of Caputo's interpretation and re-reading of Aquinas *per se*, but rather with understanding the conceptual development of Caputo's thinking and the *commitment* it illustrates to the 'matter of thought' which he learns from Heidegger. His prefacing comments to this section, therefore, are crucial for confirming this part of our study.

Caputo claims that he will treat what is left 'unsaid' in Aquinas. One cannot hope to emancipate Aquinas from Heidegger's charge if we attempt to think in terms of the historical reality of his thinking, that is, if we consider his thought in the context of the scholastic mode.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., pg. 200. For Caputo's final analysis of the metaphysics of *esse* and whether or not it too might be granted a privileged experience of Being, as in the early Greeks, see pp. 198-209.



He asks us to consider Aquinas's thought as a "constellation of *possibilities*," where we find that some of these possibilities are necessarily left unsaid, transitioning our hermeneutic stance from a historical perspective to a philosophical one. This new potential for a philosophical dialogue between Aquinas and Heidegger Caputo explicitly attributes to Heidegger's hermeneutical approach developed with respect to the Greek fragments: "[a]s Heidegger says, speaking of the interpretation of the Heraclitean fragments: 'Wishing to pursue the 'objectively correct' teaching of Heraclitus means refusing to run the salutary risk of being confounded by the truth of a thinking.'" <sup>346</sup> Heidegger's instruction is to run the 'risk of thinking' for the sake of the 'truth of thinking.' And this is precisely what Caputo will attempt to do with Meister Eckhart's mysticism and Aquinas, thus returning to his opening introductory statement of the book, "What interests me is the *Sache*, the matter which presents itself for thought." <sup>347</sup> Caputo is therefore mimicking Heidegger's hermeneutical approach that disrupted the early Greek interpretations of being to re-produce them into something new but still latent within them.

Caputo also revealingly prefaces this last chapter by saying he will commence in a retrieval or 'deconstruction' of Thomistic metaphysics. While he does indicate that he prefers Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction' to Heidegger's *Destruktion*, this is no more than a passing reference that alludes to his awareness of Derrida's earlier work, since it receives no further explanation or even a footnote. Instead he refers us back again to the German sense of '*Ab-bauen*': "the positive sense of taking a text apart in order to find its most essential and enlivening insights." <sup>348</sup> Caputo at this stage is still firmly positioned within the Heideggerian tradition of *Destruktion* first proclaimed in *Being and Time*, a tradition that famously recalls Luther's *destructio* in the Heidelberg disputations. Caputo will later fully embrace the sense in which Derrida marks off the distinction between his use of *deconstruction* and that of Heidegger's. <sup>349</sup> Here, however, there is still an affirmative preservation of Luther's meaning in Heidegger's recapitulation that Caputo is after. <sup>350</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., pg. 246.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., pg. 1.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., pg. 247.

<sup>349</sup> For a summary of these distinctions see Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 173-175. See John D. Caputo, Gianni Vattimo, Jeffrey Robbins (ed.) *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pg. 62, fn. 17.

<sup>350</sup> The argument for the continuity between Luther's sense of *destructio* and Heidegger's *Destruktion* can be found in Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 47-48. One should also emphasize that Heidegger deliberately avoided using the German word for destruction (*Zerstörung*), and instead opted for the Latinate *Destruktion* and *Abbau* in order to avoid the confusion with Nietzsche's "demolition". Indeed, as Heidegger himself writes, "Destruction does not mean destroying but dismantling, liquidating, putting to one side the merely historical assertions about the history of philosophy." See Martin Heidegger, J.T. Wilde and W. Kluback (trans.) *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), pp. 71-73.

In sum, the mystical element that Caputo develops vis-à-vis Eckhart as the unthought thought in Aquinas, is a deployment of a Heideggerian hermeneutic or *way of reading* that is in search of a non-Heideggerian, non-metaphysical, non-onto-theo-logical overcoming of metaphysics. It is also possible at this stage, then, given this hermeneutic trajectory, to see that Derridean deconstruction will almost inevitably be taken up by Caputo – ‘loosening my tongue’ as he has often written.<sup>351</sup> Though we have insisted that the primary concern will not be with evaluating the conclusions of this re-reading, let us nonetheless consider its results, since they inform our discussion below pertaining to Caputo’s full philosophical description of this Heideggerian hermeneutic, indeed, a certain *radical* hermeneutics.

Caputo suggests that Aquinas’s work must be seen in the context of a certain mystical experience he had at the end of his life.<sup>352</sup> This religious-mystical experience – something of an experience of the divine (*visio beatifica*) – is held, according to Caputo, outside of the bounds of metaphysics and is at least *analogous* to Heidegger’s ‘step-back.’ However, Aquinas does not get far. For even if he implicitly escapes metaphysics through this mystical experience,<sup>353</sup> it nonetheless remains a positive intuition of God articulated in the mode of presence. Accordingly, Caputo turns to Meister Eckhart’s negative mysticism, which expresses what Aquinas left unsaid, its ‘lethic’ dimension. The ‘lethic’ dimension is understood by Eckhart as the transcendent mystery of God within the Godhead. Everything we say of God is ‘not’ God, the Godhead “remains behind, its essential Being untouched by this discourse.”<sup>354</sup> In the doctrine of *Gelassenheit*, as Eckhart articulates it, we surrender the soul to the divine Being without attempting to objectify it, resulting in the preservation of the lethic dimension. This is why, as Caputo has shown elsewhere, Heidegger took on this term from Eckhart in his own elaborations of being, taking it to mean an ‘openness to Mystery.’<sup>355</sup> If Aquinas’s mysticism was a vision of divine union (of ascension into light) then Eckhart’s was the opposite, a mysticism into divine darkness. Eckhart, who drew much of his mystical formulations from what he saw as implicit within Aquinas, therefore, makes possible what was impossible for Aquinas to say himself.

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<sup>351</sup> Caputo, *After the Death of God*, pg. 135.

<sup>352</sup> Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 252-253. Caputo, quoting Aquinas from his personal secretary, Reginald of Piperno, writes, “Everything which I have written seems like straw to me compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me” (*Omnia, quae scripsi, videntur mihi paleae respectu eorum, quae vidi et revelata sunt mihi*).”

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 278.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 276. Caputo’s most thorough statement on Meister Eckhart is found in his first work, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978). See also, John D. Caputo, “Fundamental Themes in Meister Eckhart’s Mysticism” in *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 42. 2 (April, 1972), pp. 197-225.

<sup>355</sup> See the footnote above and Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pg. 278.

For Caputo and Heidegger, Eckhart himself is not free from the logic of metaphysics. The 'lethic' dimension operates within the 'alethic'; being withdraws but ultimately shows itself to itself in the end. The depths of God may be hidden from the religious mystic but they are not hidden from the Godhead, and thus we can place our trust in this impenetrable mystery. "Religious *Gelassenheit*," Caputo writes, "is openness to the mystery, but the mystery is not concealed from itself. It is, and this is the believer's faith, a sphere of self-openness, self-presence."<sup>356</sup> Caputo's re-reading of the metaphysics of *esse* culminates in this negative mysticism. It holds sway with respect to Heidegger only insofar as it is analogous to the 'step back'. But where Heidegger imagines a source in *a-lethia*, from which the epochs of being are sent, Eckhart and Aquinas have in mind a perfect being at the end of the tunnel. God for Heidegger is a function of the *Ereignis*, not the reverse.

In the end, Caputo re-reads the scholastic metaphysics of Aquinas in terms of the positive mysticism of Aquinas, which is subsequently read in terms of the negative mysticism of Eckhart, and finally re-read again in terms of what Thomas Sheen has called the negative mysticism of Caputo (*Caputo mysticus*) – "a negative natural religious mysticism that alone offers an alternative to Heidegger's *Ereignis*."<sup>357</sup> What becomes apparent, as Sheen identifies, is that Caputo's negative religious mysticism is, indeed, not so different to Heidegger's own 'openness to mystery.'<sup>358</sup> However, if Caputo's investigation has brought together Heidegger and Aquinas in a fruitful philosophical dialogue providing higher insight into the possibilities of religious thinking, then what remains open to question is Caputo's commitment to 'the matter of thought.' His negative natural religious outcome or the Heideggerian 'openness to mystery' will need to be itself interrogated. This will require a translation and delimitation from the openness to mystery to the openness to otherness.

## IV. Heidegger against Heidegger

The elaboration of Caputo's 'double gesture' or *way of reading* sketched in relation to *Heidegger and Aquinas* can be said to obtain its formal statement as a philosophical description in *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987). While drawing from several sources, including Kierkegaard and Husserl, Caputo champions Heidegger and Derrida in this, possibly his most important philosophical

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid., pg. 280.

<sup>357</sup> See Thomas Sheen, "A Way Out of Metaphysics?" in *Research in Phenomenology* 15.1 (1985), pp. 229-234.

<sup>358</sup> Sheen, "A Way Out of Metaphysics?", pg. 233.

work, to argue for a ‘radical thinking’ that exposes us to the ‘ruptures and gaps’ of existence.<sup>359</sup> The ultimate aim of this project was to inaugurate a thinking that brought together supposedly extreme elements of postmodern thought and to weave them into a coherency that would not devolve into nihilism but rather foster a commitment to the singularity of truth and the Other. Given the mastery and fluidity with which Caputo reads, interprets and stitches together these sources, the book received critical acclaim and is considered a textbook in many philosophy and religious studies departments.

For our purposes, *Radical Hermeneutics* stands at a crucial juncture in the development of Caputo’s thinking. Firstly, as just stated, it expounds the double gesture in a way that centers what we have been saying with respect to Heidegger. Highlighting the ‘radical tendencies’ that feed into *Being and Time* from Kierkegaard (repetition)<sup>360</sup> and Husserl (constitution), Caputo produces a reading of Heidegger’s magnum opus that reveals radical elements of hermeneutics that Heidegger himself may not have been aware of, or that his interpreters seem to have later ignored. Secondly, and importantly, Caputo’s emancipatory interpretation on Heidegger’s behalf leads to a productive confrontation with the critique of Jacques Derrida. The latter – the real hero of *Radical Hermeneutics* – forces Caputo to reconsider Heidegger more critically than he had before. While it is clear that Caputo begins to find more conviviality with Derrida, his departure from Heidegger at this point is in no way clear or decisive, on the contrary, the latter is cast beside Derrida as a necessary dialogue partner in the project of ‘radical thinking’. It is only in *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993) that Caputo will systematically lay out his reasons for adopting a more ‘guarded’ approach to Heidegger and make clear what it is in Heidegger that should be saved and what should be let go. Nonetheless, one can see in *Radical Hermeneutics* Caputo beginning to find the voice that will make his work “blaze philosophical trails,”<sup>361</sup> which can be attributed to the early formation of his phenomenology of religion in *Radical Hermeneutic’s* last three chapters.

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<sup>359</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 6.

<sup>360</sup> Indeed, synonymous with what we are calling the ‘double gesture’ here is another way of saying ‘repetition’ in the Kierkegaardian sense. Caputo writes of this influence: “[f]or those who care about such things, it is not hard to tell that *Radical Hermeneutics* is a retelling of Constantine Constantinus’s *Repetition*.” See John D. Caputo, “An American and a Liberal: A Response to Michael Zimmerman” in *Continental Philosophy Review* 31:215–220 (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 215–220; p. 215. Repetition, however, should not be exclusively thought of in terms of methodology or style, for it goes to the heart of the two-fold operation of deconstructive thought.

<sup>361</sup> As Mark Dooley writes. See the dialogue between Caputo and Mark Dooley, Ian Leask (ed.) “From Radical Hermeneutics to the Weakness of God: John D. Caputo in Dialogue with Mark Dooley”, *Philosophy Today* 51. 2 (Summer 2007), pg. 217.

In this final section, we shall sketch three phases of Caputo's engagement with Heidegger culminating in the former's own *Kehre*.<sup>362</sup> In the first phase, beginning with *Radical Hermeneutics*, we demonstrate the lengths Caputo undergoes to re-read Heidegger's *Being and Time* in order to set it into a productive relationship with the critique of Jacques Derrida. The latter will occasion the second phase, which addresses this critique head-on. This critique emerges in *Radical Hermeneutics* vis-à-vis Derrida but is also systematically laid bare in Caputo's own way in *Demythologizing Heidegger*. In the third and final phase, then, we consider what of Heidegger is preserved and discarded and how this leads into Caputo's ethical-religious turn to French post-structuralism in general and Derrida in particular.

### I. The 'upon-which' in *Being and Time*

In the late 80's Caputo became increasingly disillusioned with Heidegger's thought. Though it had not fully manifested itself, one can sense a confrontation emerging in *Radical Hermeneutics*. As we have seen above, Caputo's earlier concerns with the late Heidegger were an attempt to find a point of extrication in Aquinas from 'onto-theo-logic' and the charge of *Seinsvergessenheit*. In *Radical Hermeneutics*, however, Caputo returns to *Being and Time* in anticipation of a critique that will arise from Jacques Derrida against the late Heidegger. This anticipatory reading argues, on the one hand, for an interpretation latent in the early Heidegger which equates not to an outright defense of the late Heidegger against Derrida, but rather seeks to establish a point of contact between them. On the other hand, it also demonstrates a continuity between the Heidegger of the Marburg period and the later Heidegger with respect to the driving question which animates his work, namely, the question not of Being *itself* but of that which grants and makes Being possible. This emerging confrontation, then, is framed in *Radical Hermeneutics* less as an antagonism and more as a productivity, with the added subtlety of a discreet Heideggerian apologia.

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<sup>362</sup> Caputo self-describes this *Kehre* in a number of places, see "An American and a liberal: John D. Caputo's Response to Michael Zimmerman," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31 (1998), pg. 220, and also, Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), pg. 72. To talk of "Kehre" is, of course, in itself philosophically and historically questionable. Caputo's reading of Heidegger in *Radical Hermeneutics*, for example, seems to suggest much more of a continuation with the early and later Heidegger, especially in his discussions of the 'upon-which' (*das Woraufin*) we shall see below. This is also the case with Jacques Derrida, where some refer to his 'political' and 'ethical' *Kehre*, while others and Derrida included, have argued that deconstruction has always been ethical. See for example, Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Blackwell Publishers, 1992). While the themes of the religious, the ethical and theological are undeniable in Caputo's later work (aided predominantly by the accents of Derrida and Levinas), the present chapter hopes to clarify that the seeds for these later themes are sown in the thought of Martin Heidegger, and indeed, cannot be understood without it.

What is the nature of Caputo's reading of *Being and Time* that allows this productivity? In its simplest formulation, Caputo argues that Heidegger has always from the start been concerned not with *Being*, but with what goes on *beyond* Being. In the later Heidegger, this is confirmed when going *beyond* Being means that which grants Being and which 'lets' Being be — *Ereignis*, *a-lethia* etc. In *Being and Time* this point is made, according to Caputo, in a 'meaning structure' that consists in the movement of a two-fold projection of a being on its Being; an easily missed distinction between a primary and secondary projection which distinguishes *Being* and the *meaning* of Being in a unique sense. To understand this, Caputo indicates the context of the culmination of the text of *Being and Time* in §74, where the ontology of repetition is defined and defended. The context of this section depends on the elaboration of 'temporality of Dasein' in §65 and which is itself prefaced by another discussion of the importance of the 'constancy' of the self in §64. These three sections for Caputo are explicitly drawn from Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition,<sup>363</sup> which Heidegger underplays to his own detriment.<sup>364</sup> In order to issue the ontology of repetition which follows from the repetition of the existential analytic, Heidegger first determined the Being of Dasein as care in Division I. Now he must characterize care in terms of temporality to bring the existential analytic to its head.

The discussion on temporality is prefaced (§64) by an argument that Dasein is not a unity in a Kantian sense, but rather a 'constancy' insofar as it stands 'anticipatorily resolute' in the flux of its inauthentic 'they-self'. It is only a unity to the extent that it unifies itself in "the unity of a projection in which it binds itself to what it has been all along."<sup>365</sup> For it to "bind itself" Dasein needs a theory of temporality offered in §65 that moves from the 'care-structure' to the 'meaning-structure' of care. This 'meaning-structure' is the central 'radical' hermeneutic point for Caputo, which will allow him to speak of Being as an "effect" — to use Derridian language. The 'meaning-structure' is described in accordance with the *meaning* of care as temporality. Everything hangs here on what is understood by *meaning*. Caputo writes:

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<sup>363</sup> "The treatment of the constancy of the self comes from the discussion of the 'continuance of sin' in *The Sickness unto Death*. The analysis of temporality is dependent upon the analysis of existential temporality in the second volume of *Either/Or*. And the all-important discussion of repetition [§74] is based quite directly upon Kierkegaard, as I have been arguing throughout." Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>364</sup> This is the difficulty, according to Caputo, for the Heidegger of the Marburg period when he produced *Being and Time*. Heidegger was still 'under the spell' of Husserl's conviction that saw phenomenology as a universal science. Giving too much to the latter meant that Heidegger's hermeneutics did not distrust the history of ontology enough, thus eliciting Derrida's critique of 'onto-hermeneutics'. Had Heidegger been more faithful to his Kierkegaardian influence he may have side stepped Derrida's critique. See Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 83.

<sup>365</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 84.



Meaning is not the object of understanding, *what* is understood by the understanding, but, more exactly, the organizing component *in* what is understood, that upon which the understandability depends, around which it is organized and “maintained” (*sich halten*) ...” “Meaning’ signifies the ‘upon-which’ [*das Woraufhin*] of a primary projection in terms of which something can be conceived in its possibility as that which it is.”<sup>366</sup>

The ‘upon-which’ or *das Woraufhin* is the prethematic operation that guides and organizes the projection of a being on its *Being*. Thus, if temporality is the ‘meaning’ of ontological care, then it is also that ‘upon-which’ something can be conceived in its possibilities of that which it is. The ‘upon-which’, therefore, describes a radical hermeneutic thrust in *Being and Time*, which not only regards this or that being or entity but is concerned with *Being in general*. Heidegger is, thus, engaged in a hermeneutic that is not so much interested in Being or beings but rather in what makes Being possible. Caputo writes, “To think Being is to remain within the first projective cut, but to think the meaning of Being is to make a hermeneutic determination of so radical sort that it leaves metaphysics and its ‘Being’ behind.”<sup>367</sup> This ‘upon-which’ proves to be the existential structure of temporality, the projection of the Being of Dasein as care, which allows care, and therefore Dasein, to be what it is.

Caputo’s point here is to draw a parallel between what he believes the early Heidegger has conceived, namely, the beings/Being/meaning structure and the beings/Being/*Ereignis* structure of the late Heidegger we saw above. If successful, Caputo will be able to preserve a coefficient in Heidegger’s thought that divests it of transcendental remnants and lend credence to his claim that there is a productive point of contact between Heidegger and Derrida.

## II. “Cold Hermeneutics”

After *Being and Time*, Caputo makes clear from texts such as *Discourse on Thinking*<sup>368</sup> and *On the Way to Language*,<sup>369</sup> respectively, that on the one hand, Heidegger himself became uncertain

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., pg. 84. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 370-371.

<sup>367</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 85.

<sup>368</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1960). English translation: Martin Heidegger, Hans Freund and John Anderson (trans.) *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

<sup>369</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1965). English translation: Martin Heidegger, Peter Hertz (trans.) *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

about 'transcendental horizontal' language,<sup>370</sup> and on the other, he needed to enact a certain retrieval of hermeneutics. The language of Dasein and projection in *Being and Time* was too close to Nietzschean 'willing' (*Vor-stellen*) and thus needed to be delimited in favor of that which lets the horizon be without projecting onto it.<sup>371</sup> Above, we saw this expressed variously by terms such as 'the open,' *alēthia*, *Gelassenheit*, *Austrag* and *Ereignis*. Subsequently, Caputo identifies a correspondence and continuity in this two-fold step from the language of willing to that of 'the open,' and the quest for 'meaning' beyond Being (the 'upon-which') in *Being and Time*. When compared to *Being and Time*, there is certainly something different going in the later Heidegger, for indeed he drops the term "hermeneutics" after *Being and Time* completely. However, Caputo notes that Heidegger, nonetheless, "never really drops anything," but reworks or repeats his language in the interest of thought. The question now arises: with what in this repetition does Derrida take issue? And how — having established the continuity in Heidegger's thinking — will this occasion a point of contact between Derrida and Heidegger allowing Caputo to set them together in what he calls a "Cold Hermeneutics"?

Derrida's critique of Heidegger initially issues from *Spurs* (1978),<sup>372</sup> his essay "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" (1982)<sup>373</sup> and *Margins of Philosophy* (1982).<sup>374</sup> In the former Heidegger is challenged by a synthesis between Nietzsche's critique of truth and Derrida's semiotic effect produced by *différance*. The problem according to Derrida is that Heidegger essentially misread Nietzsche insofar as he did not pick up the irony of Nietzsche's woman — that she herself believes that she is a fiction; "indeed, if woman *is* truth, *she* at least knows that there is no truth."<sup>375</sup> Derrida's interpretation of Nietzsche derides the sexual difference. For him, it is an enforced construction and a fiction unto itself, leaving those who *believe* in it to be fooled by it. Heidegger is the hermeneut that does not recognize this style in Nietzsche, he is fooled into believing truth, whether the 'truth of Being' or *alēthia*.<sup>376</sup> His is an 'onto-hermeneutics' which plumbs the depths for truth. However, as we have seen all along in this chapter, and as Caputo will repeatedly argue in *Radical Hermeneutics*, this does

<sup>370</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 98-115.

<sup>371</sup> "By projecting a horizon we shrink the open down to our size, so that it contains objects made to fit our subjective-human limitations." Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 103.

<sup>372</sup> Jacques Derrida, Barbara Harlow (trans.) *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

<sup>373</sup> Jacques Derrida, John P. Leavey (trans.), "Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy", *Semeia* 23 (1982), pp.63-97.

<sup>374</sup> Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

<sup>375</sup> Derrida, *Spurs*, pg. 53.

<sup>376</sup> Caputo's argument here shows a clear development with respect to his reading of Derrida. In 1984 he published a short essay where he makes his skepticism of the Dionysian woman clear, "Derrida's Dionysian strategies serve a purpose; but left to themselves the cut us off entirely from the things themselves, delivering us over to a surfeit of fictions and willful constructions." See John D. Caputo, "'Supposing Truth To Be A Woman...': Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida" in *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* 32 (1984), pp. 15-21; pg. 21.

not tell the full story of Heidegger. Derrida himself recognized this in *Spurs* when he wrote, “[e]ach time that Heidegger refers the question of Being to the question of the property (*propre*), of propiety, of appropriation (*eigen, eignen, ereignen, Ereignis* especially) this dehiscence bursts forth anew.”<sup>377</sup> And again, when he comments on *Ereignis*, “Its irruption here does not mark a rupture or turning point in the order of Heidegger’s thought.”<sup>378</sup> In citing these remarks, Caputo is pointing to a repetition and recognition of Heidegger’s early work by Derrida that opens space for intertwining their projects in support of his own. But before Caputo can present his ‘Cold Hermeneutics,’ he must address the second (and most important in this author’s opinion) thrust of Derrida’s critique – what was alluded to above as Heidegger’s ‘mythical-eschatological’ tendencies.

If the beginning of Heidegger’s *Kehre* involved surrendering the hermeneutics of ‘transcendental-horizonal’ language (jettisoning the fore-structures of *Being and Time*) then it ended by re-reading hermeneutics in terms of a more primordial experience of Being, indeed, a certain “message of destiny (*Geschick*)” that is *heard* from Being. This messaging introduces a portrait of the relationship between ‘Man’ and Being that emerges in the late Heidegger as more ascetic, insofar as we are always already in the possession of Being. What becomes of the hermeneut is akin to receiving messages from the Greek god Hermes, where the latter is the epochal sendings of Being, and the former is the hermeneut who can read and interpret them.<sup>379</sup> Heidegger’s hermeneutics becomes not “a question of supplying an anticipatory projection of the Being of beings but of hearing a message (‘eine Botschaft zu hören’) that is not about supplying anticipatory horizons but about listening to what is sent our way.”<sup>380</sup> Thus, one observes the beginning of a certain mythical-eschatology in Heidegger encompassing, on the one hand, an almost mythological partiality for the early Greeks, and on the other, a so severe withdrawal of Being that we are now at the end waiting for the *eschaton* – the inauguration of the new. Indeed, this is the context in which Caputo locates Heidegger’s oft-quoted phrase at the end of the infamous *Der Spiegel* interview: “[o]nly a god can save us now.”<sup>381</sup> It is with this mythical and eschatological ‘epistolary principle’ that Derrida takes issue.

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<sup>377</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 172, quoted from Derrida, *Spurs*, pp. 115-117. Here in *Radical Hermeneutics* there is always a movement beyond Being in Heidegger’s writing for Caputo; “Although Heidegger is always talking about Being and *Ereignis*, he invariably ends up in a movement beyond Being, ground, presence, and truth, landing in an abyss (*Ab-grund*) of dis-propriation (*Ent-eignis*),” Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 158.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, pg. 29.

<sup>380</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 103.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., pg. 160.

In the discussion concerning the early Greeks, we saw how those investigations sought to describe a process of the rising up of presence into what is present, or the emergence of things into un-concealment before receding again. We saw that for the late Heidegger this process is favored in the early Greeks because they experienced Being in a unique and pristine way before it congealed over. Now, at the height of congealment in the history of Being in the West, the task of thinking is to listen again to the messages of this primordial sending. In doing so, “The *eschaton*,” Caputo writes, “repeats the *arche*, retrieves the possible, saves us all just at that moment when all is dark, indeed darkest.”<sup>382</sup> The capacity of the *Seinsgeschick* to ‘save us’ resides in the unity of its sending and in our ability to hear the unity of its message. According to Derrida, such a unity is a suspicious dream and a function of eschatological and apocalyptic thinking, where the deep essence of truth is presupposed even in the announcement of the apocalypse itself.<sup>383</sup> The extent of this suspicion is heightened when considered under the re-reading that Derrida undertook of Husserl against the possibilities of “effective communication.”<sup>384</sup> In the postal system of sending and receiving there can never be a determinable message or recipient, only the play of the alterable chain of signifiers.

However, there is again something in Heidegger that even Derrida recognizes does not fully accord with this reading. There is a Heidegger that can be read *against* Heidegger. Even while there is a reading of Heidegger which — thanks to Heidegger himself — Derrida’s work opens up (when he speaks of an ‘apocalypse without apocalypse’ for example), Caputo assumes responsibility to present and pursue this ‘radical’ reading. This will culminate in Caputo’s ‘demythologized Heidegger.’ With Derrida’s critique and his equally important hesitation to resist ever closing down Heidegger’s text, therefore, Caputo is able to defend a version of Heidegger he has already begun formulating in his early work, while at the same time now bringing Derrida alongside his project of a radical or ‘Cold Hermeneutics.’ Cold hermeneutics is precisely this intertwining of both Heidegger and Derrida, a ‘cold hermeneutic shiver’ effectuated by the joining of a demythologized Heidegger and a disruptive Derrida.

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., pg. 165.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-67.

<sup>384</sup> See Caputo’s chapter 5 “Repetition and the Emancipation of Signs,” *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 120-152, where he traces Derrida’s fascinating re-reading of Husserl and addresses much of Derrida’s early writings including: *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry* (1962), *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Speech and Phenomena* (1967) and *Dissemination* (1972). We reserve a formal engagement with Caputo’s reading of Derrida for subsequent chapters.

### III. Demythologized Heidegger and the turn to Derrida

In Caputo's 'Cold Hermeneutics' neither Heidegger nor Derrida get ahead of the other. When we think that Derrida has delimited Heidegger's project as just another raised degree of metaphysics (onto-hermeneutics and belief in the truth of Being's sending and receiving), "Heidegger infiltrates Derrida with a hermeneutic moment — an apophatic, not cataphatic, hermeneutics — a moment in which we concede the play in which we are caught up, a moment of openness to the mystery which everywhere invades us,"<sup>385</sup> that is, the *lethic* quality in a hyphenated *a-lēthia*.

For the remainder of *Radical Hermeneutics* and its last three chapters in particular, Caputo oscillates between the metaphors of Derrida and Heidegger. For example, he explains how Derrida's deconstruction is done in the 'marketplace' — it has an ethico-political and liberative effect.<sup>386</sup> Whereas Heidegger, on the other hand, falls short of a political edge. His hermeneutics is carried out on a 'country path,' a metaphors of 'stillness and simplicity' that emphasizes openness to the mystery of Being's withdrawal. However, on the basis of Caputo's demythologized Heidegger this does not necessarily mean inaction. Indeed, in the final chapters of *Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo reaches to develop from the ontological and epistemological implications of this renewed Heidegger, an 'Ethics of *Gelassenheit*' where "*Gelassenheit* is a certain intervention in these power systems which releases their grip and lets things be."<sup>387</sup> But this is only a 'reach,' for in the final analysis this ethical-political 'lack' and its implications motivates Caputo to move *beyond* Heidegger to Derrida and French 'postmodernism.' To understand this shift, we must consider more precisely what it is that caused Caputo to adopt a more critical and guarded view of Heidegger. We find this in the final book he publishes on Heidegger in the early nineties, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993).

It should be noted that Derrida's criticisms of Heidegger were not the origination of Caputo's own critical concerns. Already in his first book, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1978), Caputo had raised questions over the status of ethics.<sup>388</sup> However, it was Derrida above all that enhanced these concerns, making Caputo's earlier reading of Heideggerian terms like *Das Woraufin*, *Ereignis* and *alēthia* that much more pertinent. A further shadow was also cast,

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<sup>385</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 190.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., pp. 192-198.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., pg. 205 and pp. 264-267. Heidegger claims the term *Gelassenheit* from Meister Eckhart. Caputo devotes a number of pages to this in *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), pp. 118-127.

<sup>388</sup> See Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, pp. 254-258.

Caputo notes, when research began appearing that confirmed his own internal philosophical concerns,<sup>389</sup> as well as a growing body of literature that presented incontrovertible historical evidence of Heidegger's nefarious political engagements.<sup>390</sup> The tandem effect of this situation in the late 80's lead to Caputo's reappraisal of Heidegger that locates his fall from grace and traces its philosophical development in his later thought from the 1930's onward.<sup>391</sup>

Caputo argues that Heidegger was held captive by a myth of Being ("a sweeping metanarrative, a myth of monogenesis")<sup>392</sup> and a great Greek beginning. His earlier accents of Martin Luther, St. Paul, Aristotle and Søren Kierkegaard, faded into the background in favor of the Eleatics and the poetry of Hölderlin.<sup>393</sup> As we have seen, the 'mythological operation' does not exist and is, in fact, opposed in *Being and Time*. The 'meaning' of Being does not have historical instantiation but is a theory about *how* that history is constructed and about the conditions that allow Being to have meaning. The 'mythological operation' comes to the fore explicitly in the *Grundfrage der Philosophie* (1937-38) lecture course, where the 'meaning' of Being takes on a historical role as opposed to a functional one. Instead of modernity being seen as a breakthrough with respect to its conception of time and the subject (Kant), it was now seen as the most extreme end (eschaton) in the history of ontology. Everything after the early Greeks is seen as a 'falling away' from the self-showing of Being (the Greek experience).<sup>394</sup> The project of the Freiburg period culminating in *Being and Time* had now, according to Caputo, undergone a significant overhaul. The investigations into facticity from biblical sources and Aristotelian ethics ('jewgreek')<sup>395</sup> that characterized that period of Heidegger's thought were cut down to an exclusive Greek *Anfang*.

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<sup>389</sup> With respect to ethics and politics, Caputo cites Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *La fiction du politique* (1987) and Lyotard's *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (1988).

<sup>390</sup> For Heidegger's relationship to the Nazism, see Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1988) and for a summary see Thomas Sheehan, "Heidegger and the Nazis," *The New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/06/16/heidegger-and-the-nazis/>, (16 June, 1988).

<sup>391</sup> The debates around Heidegger's Nazi involvement and the anti-Semitic undertones of his work have not subsided, see the recently published volumes of the so-called *Black Notebooks* edited by Peter Trawny: Martin Heidegger, *Überlegungen II–VI (Schwarze Hefte 1931–1938)*, GA 94 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2014); *Überlegungen VII–XI (Schwarze Hefte 1938/39)*, GA 95 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2014); and *Überlegungen XII–XV (Schwarze Hefte 1939–1941)*, GA 96 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2014). See also Paul Hockenos, "Release of Heidegger's Black Notebooks Reignites Debate Over Nazi Ideology," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Release-of-Heidegger-s/144897>, (February, 24, 2014). The publication of the *Black Notebooks* has also provoked theology to reevaluate its long-time romance with Heidegger. In this regard see Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (eds.) *Heidegger's Black Notebooks and the future of theology* (Springer-Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>392</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pg. 4.

<sup>393</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pp. 148-68.

<sup>394</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pp. 9-39. See also the article version of this chapter, "Demythologizing Heidegger: *Aletheia* and the History of Being," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 41 (March 1988), pp. 519-46.

<sup>395</sup> The 'jewgreek' is a Derridianism Caputo uses in this context to refer to this dual influence in the early Heidegger. The expression is originally taken from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and was given its classic gloss by Derrida in



In short, Heidegger had ‘essentialized’ his project.<sup>396</sup> The task of ‘demythologizing’, then, will not only consist in articulating the causes of this mythology, but also in ‘re-mythologizing’ *differently*. For, as we have argued throughout, Caputo is not exclusively concerned with matters of biography, but with *die Sache des Denkes*, which he learns from Heidegger.<sup>397</sup> To re-mythologize is to think the myth of the ‘jewgreek’ – a myth of justice. It is to reinstate what Heidegger excluded when he (mis)read the New Testament. In schematizing the categories of care and difficulty he left out the “whole thematics of the ethics of mercy, the cry for justice.”<sup>398</sup> It is at this moment that the turn is formally inaugurated in Caputo’s thought, first through Levinas and then Derrida. Indeed, the book that Caputo cites as a ‘companion’ to *Demythologizing Heidegger* is his *Against Ethics* published in the same year.<sup>399</sup> In subsequent chapters we will address more precisely the character of Caputo’s relationship with Derrida and what is meant by ethics and religion. For now, we can say that before (in *Radical Hermeneutics*) Caputo was still reading Derrida in the narrow sense of ‘writing’, which is why he needed Heidegger and Kierkegaard to supplement an existential affirmation of life. There are, indeed, hints of an ‘ethics of dissemination’ in *Radical Hermeneutics* which point in the direction of a phenomenology of religion,<sup>400</sup> but only when he has put Heidegger to rest can he effect the transition.<sup>401</sup> To put this another way, radical hermeneutics has to do with an existential affirmation of life by ‘restoring life to its original difficulty,’ but this affirmation was not enough when met with the obligation of the other and his/her suffering. *Radical*

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his essay “Violence and Metaphysics” which can be found in *Writing and Difference* (1978). In Caputo’s *Against Ethics* (1993) he comments on his own use of the phrase: “I will use the expression ‘jewgreek’ throughout this study to signify, emblematically, everything miscegenated and impure and hence subject to expulsion, decontamination, extermination. I also use it to say that whatever I say here is always already Greek, philosophical, metaphysical, that one cannot simply walk away from our inherited Greek conceptuality, now would one want to, as both Derrida and Levinas insist.” See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pg. 258, fn. 61.

<sup>396</sup> See chapter six “Heidegger’s Essentialism: The Logic of the Mythologic of Being” in Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pp. 118-130.

<sup>397</sup> “The decisions I defend below depend upon the analyses of texts and the soundness of my views, not upon settling the affair of Heidegger’s biography. This is not a book about Heidegger’s Nazism, but about Heidegger’s thought.” However, biography and thought are never extricated from one another, which is precisely why a work of ‘demythologizing’ will also necessarily be “an operation of denazification.” *Ibid.*, pg. 5.

<sup>398</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pg. 57.

<sup>399</sup> See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>400</sup> The religious hermeneutic for Caputo is connected to suffering, “Religion arises as an expression of solidarity with the suffering.” *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 280.

<sup>401</sup> As already noted, the dye is already being cast in the final chapters of *Radical Hermeneutics*, but also can be seen in chapter ten of *Demythologizing Heidegger*, “Hyperbolic Justice: Demythologizing differently with Derrida and Levinas”, pp. 186-208. An older version of this chapter was published in 1991: “Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth and Politics,” *Research in Phenomenology*, 21 (1991), pp. 3-20. Following Levinas and Derrida Caputo begins here to start problematizing the relationship between ethics, politics and justice. Although he is still committed to ‘mythologizing differently,’ from *Against Ethics* onward, he seems to have heeded Levinas’ call from *Otherwise than Being* for the “demythization of the myths,” and drops the vocabulary of myth completely. See Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis (trans.) *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), pg. 180.

*Hermeneutics* inaugurates the turn *away* from Heidegger (*Demythologizing Heidegger*), to ethics (*Against Ethics*), to religion without religion (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 1997), and finally to theology (*The Weakness of God*, 2006), indeed, a radical theology (*The Insistence of God*, 2013). *Radical hermeneutics* is replaced by *radical theology*. As mentioned, it will be the burden of later chapters to investigate what is going on in these later works. For now, we have been concerned with the voice of Heidegger in Caputo's early work as it relates to the project of over-coming metaphysics and the impetus it generates for the trajectory of Caputo's radical theological project.

# Chapter Four

## The Il/logic of the *Sans*

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### I. Introduction

If we are to follow Caputo's radically demythologized reading of Heidegger, then the metaphysical foundations of Schmitt's politics of presence are left in ruin(s).<sup>402</sup> But to leave something in ruins is not, as Caputo and Derrida will suggest, the final word of deconstruction. Indeed, ruins can be restored. And although, as in any restoration, the palimpsestuous vestiges from a past remain, there is always the enduring possibility that a restoration may fail or succeed, creating something, *perhaps*, wholly unrecognizable.

In this chapter, we will read the developing character of Caputo's work with respect to sovereignty in the domain of ethics and religion. Following the slightly gnomic analogy above, the question of whether these domains remain in 'ruins' will be answered according to the 'strange il/logic of the *sans*',<sup>403</sup> where ethics becomes obligation, and religion a desire for something we cannot name. Here, the il/logic of the *sans* is one of the organizing levers that cuts across the various idioms that characterize deconstruction. By investigating the unique manner in which some of these idioms are deployed, it will be shown that this logic remains a consistent feature of Caputo's writing, but also exposes different inflections and re-

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<sup>402</sup> See Laurence Hemming, "Heidegger's claim 'Carl Schmitt thinks as a Liberal'" in *Journal for Cultural Research*, 20. 3 (2016), pp. 286-294. Hemming follows Heidegger's lecture notes on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* where Heidegger argues that Schmitt thinks under the guise of Hegelian Liberalism: "[he] can only ground the being of the human being in the state, he is not able to think how the being of the human being is grounded in being itself." Pg. 288.

<sup>403</sup> John D. Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology" in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (Spring 2011), pg. 34. Caputo is referencing Derrida's adoption of Blanchot's syntax "according to which 'X sans X,' is not a simple negation, nullification, or destruction, but a reinscription of X, a certain reversal of the movement of X that still communicates with X." See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pg. 100. This phrase, then, the 'il/logic of the *sans*' is used here for its explanatory and organizing potential. It exerts a paradigmatic function that helps to explain Derrida's literary enactment or performance as it is deployed in many contexts under different names. It is precisely due to the character of deconstruction that this il/logic can function similarly in different contexts, while at the same time using other figures to emphasize different valences within the text. For example, in his earlier work in philosophy of language he was playing with the writing, spelling and auditory ambiguity of *différance*; when he is discussing Kantian aesthetics he speaks about the difficulty to distinguish the art work with the notion of the *par-ergon*; when the discussion revolves around political and religious tropes he uses *messianicity* in a 'religion without religion,' *the impossible* for a 'gift without a gift' and a *democracy to come* for a 'community without community.' We may also call these, as Caputo has alluded to elsewhere, the 'axiologies' of deconstruction. See John D. Caputo, "The Experience of God and the Axiology of the Impossible" in Mark A. Wrathall (ed.) *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 123-145.

conceptions of sovereignty, apropos ethics, religion, and theology. It will be important for our purposes to unpack this logic and its operations so central to deconstruction.

Deconstruction for Derrida and Caputo has to do with a deeper affirmation, a yes, a desire for *the impossible*, a preparation for something or someone, an ‘other’ that is coming at a time we neither know nor can predict. It was with this fundamental *ethical* avowal (via Levinas)<sup>404</sup> that Caputo opposed Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology with a more Derridian radical hermeneutics. As we saw in *Radical Hermeneutics* and *Demythologizing Heidegger*, Caputo begins to experiment with affirmation as an ‘ethics of dissemination’ in response to the suppression of the prophetic-jewish element in Heidegger’s narrative of a Greek *Anfang*. Caputo’s next publication, *Against Ethics* (1993), can be seen as a continuation but also systematic exploration of what in those two previous publications appeared as postscripts requiring thicker descriptions.

This chapter, in part, elucidates and brings to the fore Caputo’s thinking of ethics and its relation to postmodernism and deconstruction. In the subsequent investigation, we consider a series of crucial distinctions that Caputo develops (Dionysus vs. the Rabbi, heteromorphism vs. heteronomism) in order to move beyond them to an ethical *undecidability*. Caputo argues for a ‘poetics of obligation’ which stands for an il/logical deconstructed ethics – an ethics *sans* ethics. This portion of the discussion goes to the heart of questions around sovereignty in its engagement with the modern and postmodern subject.

As is often described, modern subjectivity conceives the human being as a sovereign autonomous self-determining agency. Ethics from Aristotle to Kant to Hegel and even Heidegger is too metaphysical for Caputo, and thus assumes an unbalanced prioritization of the subject in its capacity as an ethical agent. As an alternative, Caputo cultivates an ethics which arises from a deep encounter with the face of the other. Such an encounter is not dictated from the good, a categorical imperative, value theory or an originary ethics, but rather from a *love* of difference (Nietzsche and Deleuze) and from being held accountable to the law (*nomos*) of the other (*hetero*), which is justice (Levinas, Lyotard and Derrida). Caputo stages an ethics of obligation – stressing responsibility over metaphysics – on the scene of Kierkegaard’s re-telling of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* (1843). With postmodern

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<sup>404</sup> To understand deconstruction as ‘ethical’ is to recognize the undoubted, though complex, influence of Emmanuel Levinas on Derrida’s thought. For a landmark study in this regard, see Simon Critchley’s *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [1992] 2014).

twists, poetic flare and irony, Caputo mimics Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio. In doing so, he attempts to re-articulate the semantics of sovereign autonomous individuality vis-à-vis the il/logical undecidability of platitudinous difference on the one hand, and the singularity of responsibility on the other.

The manuscript for *Against Ethics* had just been completed when Derrida published his own reading of Kierkegaard's story of Abraham in "Donner la mort" (1993).<sup>405</sup> Somewhat fortuitously, Caputo's portrayal of what a deconstructive reading of Kierkegaard might look like was affirmed by Derrida's text. This confirmation received new energy in a slightly different direction, however, when astounding comments Derrida made emerged in his pseudo-autobiography, *Circonfession* (1991).<sup>406</sup> There Derrida spoke for the first time of his own 'religion.' Was this an affirmation of Judaism (having been born a Jew in French speaking Algeria)? Or was it a 'latinized' Christianity or simply atheism (both were possibilities given his Western education in France)? Yes and no. Indeed, there was something religious about Derrida's confession but it was not typically religious Caputo argued: "Derrida has a religion, a certain religion, his religion, and he speaks of God all the time...without religion and without religion's God."<sup>407</sup> Derrida's 'confession' seems to have been heard in a particularly providential way by Caputo, which culminated in a passionate, highly stylized, symbiotic performance of a *certain* Derridian religion and was presented in the meticulously detailed, and arguably career-defining book of his corpus, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997).<sup>408</sup> Although not yet explicating a 'theology' *per se*,<sup>409</sup> but rather reflecting on the possibility of a 'religious' way to read deconstruction, Caputo's *Prayers and Tears* it has been said "brought theology into Derrida."<sup>410</sup> Caputo's startling and controversial claim took this a step even further. It was not simply that theology had resonances with deconstruction –

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<sup>405</sup> Caputo acknowledges this in the beginning of *Against Ethics*. See Jacques Derrida, David Willis (trans). *The Gift of Death*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>406</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circonfession: cinquante-neuf périodes et périphrases*, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991). For the English translation see Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases*, in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999 [1993]), pp. 153-155.

<sup>407</sup> See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pg. xviii.

<sup>408</sup> Capturing Caputo's hybrid style in this work, Graham Ward writes: "Caputo performs Derrida. What he offers is not strictly exposition. It is as if Derrida's texts were scores and Caputo's task is to render the notation audible. Hence the style is, by turns, florid, playful, jubilant, and witty...As the book weaves into Derrida's voice scriptural references and resonances...It performs a certain mysticism, a postmodern spirituality. It practices Derrida's own inter- and intra-textuality." See Graham Ward, "The Prayers And Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion" in *Modern Theology* 15.4 (1999), pg. 505.

<sup>409</sup> *Prayers and Tears* does offer a series of what Caputo calls 'Edifying Divertissements' between chapters, however, which clearly point toward his later 'radical' theology.

<sup>410</sup> See Marko Zlomislíć and Neal DeRoo (eds.) *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010), pg. 1.

which other so-called ‘death of God’ theologians like Taylor, Altizer, Winkquist and Raschke had already investigated<sup>411</sup> – but rather that it was Derrida himself who was bringing theology into deconstruction all along.<sup>412</sup> If the relationship between Derrida and theology was dominated by hermeneutics and a form of deconstructive writing from the 1960’s to the 1990’s, Caputo’s book “blows this understanding of deconstruction and theology apart.”<sup>413</sup> What Caputo realizes is that there is something ‘more’ going on in deconstruction, something irreducible to writing, a faith and a religion that belong to Derrida even if he ‘rightly passes for an atheist,’ and the misunderstanding of which has led him to be read “less and less well.”<sup>414</sup> A religion *without* religion, Derrida’s religion, points to a faith that exceeds the text. The force of this renewed reading of Derrida initiated a sea change in continental philosophy of religion studies. Indeed, its subsequent influence and impact can be seen in the numerous books and critical anthologies responding to it, as well as other publications on the relationship between Derrida and theology more generally. This was also thanks, in no small part, to the ‘Religion and Postmodernism’ conferences held at Villanova University, which Caputo helped organized from 1997 and in which Derrida participated until his death in 2004.<sup>415</sup> In the third part of the chapter, we begin an initial investigation into some of the religious themes deployed in *Prayers and Tears*, where a Derridian philosophy of religion *sans* religion starts to take shape.

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<sup>411</sup> See Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology* (Michigan: Crossroad, 1982) and Charles E. Winkquist, *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). For a short but excellent review of so-called ‘Death of God’ theology, see Jeffrey Robbins editor’s introduction in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 1-24.

<sup>412</sup> Zlomislíć and DeRoo in *Cross and Khôra* write “If Taylor pioneered bringing Derrida into theology, it could be said that Caputo pioneered bringing theology into Derrida (although he adeptly shows that it was, in fact, Derrida who originally brought theology into Derrida).” Pg.1, fn.1.

<sup>413</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pg. 94.

<sup>414</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. xxiii.

<sup>415</sup> First, with respect to the ‘Religion and Postmodernism’ conferences held at Villanova University, a number of volumes were published subsequent to each meeting. After the first conference in 1997, see John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); after the 1999 conference, see John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); for the third conference in 2001 see John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (eds.), *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); for the volume after the last conference held in 2003 just before Derrida’s death in 2004, see John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (eds.), *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). Two critical volumes worth mentioning which address Caputo directly; the first concerning his ‘religious’ reading of Derrida, see James H. Olthuis (ed.), *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002) and the second, which looks at the impact of his oeuvre more generally, see Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in focus* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003). For the most recent and fairly accessible introduction to Derrida and his relationship to theology see Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009). It should also be noted that before the Villanova conferences a symposium was held on the small Italian island of Capri on February 28, 1994. This gathering is often thought of as the ‘return to religion’ in an otherwise unsympathetic climate of sentiments to religious themes held in the philosophical academy of continental Europe. Among those who convened to talk about religion were Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo, Eugenio Triás and Hans-Georg Gadamer. See Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.) *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) for the collection of important essays that were later translated and published.



*Prayers and Tears* opens a window to Derrida's quasi-religion, an ir/religion or a religion *sans* religion that is structured more like a prayer or a confession. It lacks definitive content and utilizes strategies, imagery, tropes and religious texts to develop a 'poetics of the human condition.' In this work, Caputo is not interested in an attempt to assimilate theological texts into deconstruction.<sup>416</sup> For example, when he reads Augustine's question "What do I love when I love my God?", he is reading Derrida's *repetition* of Augustine in *Circumfession* with a poetic irony and humor to *re-posit* Augustine in a postmodern way. This is true of all the paradigmatic theological themes investigated in *Prayers and Tears*; from the God of apophatic theology, the Apocalyptic, the Messianic, the Gift and Circumcision — all are written under erasure, that is, by the il/logic of the *sans*. Since we are occupied with understanding this logic in the first place, it will be neither necessary nor possible to explore all of these religious tropes. In the next chapter, when we turn to Caputo's 'radical theology,' some of these themes re-emerge as consistent points of reference when they are 'organized' under the name of God, or rather as 'events' that are 'harbored by the name of God' in Caputo's vision of an anarchic kingdom. At that point they will require further comment and investigation. The concern for the discussion of *Prayers and Tears* in this particular chapter, then, is with deconstructing sovereign 'Religion' (in this case, Christianity) according to a very particular il/logic that does not terminate religion or its God(s), but brings to bear new possibilities and promises.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the first section, the opportunity is taken to provide the reader with a short entry point into postmodernism and in particular deconstruction. Up to this point we have been invested in Caputo's relationship with Martin Heidegger, with the appearance of Jacques Derrida functioning more or less as a kind of initial de-limiting effect on the discourse of Being. Since the majority of Caputo's thinking about ethics, religion and theology (and indeed, all his subsequent writing) revolve around the erotics of the deconstructive style, it will be necessary to highlight a few key moments of historical and conceptual importance. Following this, we turn to *Against Ethics*, where Caputo fulfills his promise of providing an account of a postmodern ethics of obligation. This discussion unpacks a series of distinctions that replay the rhythms (il/logics) of deconstruction in the postmodern polemic *par excellence* — the sovereignty of the modern subject. The remainder of the chapter considers the category of the 'apophatic' or 'negative theology' as it is canvassed in *Prayers and Tears*. Here, negative theology's 'wounded

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<sup>416</sup> See his response to Martin Hägglund; Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion," pg. 42.

language' functions analogously to deconstruction's il/logic of *writing under erasure* expressed by its desire for the wholly other. However, at the same time, negative theology still doesn't quite understand that the wholly other is not found outside our experience of otherness, but must be located in the world of others. This leads to what Caputo calls 'exemplarism' and 'translatibility,' two principle themes which 'save' the name 'God' by reminding that God as wholly other is also *any* other. These themes become crucial elements in re-writing the nature of authority (or sovereignty) in religious discourse, insofar as they alert the 'determinable religions' of their inability to claim the name of 'God' as their own.

The main goal of this chapter, then, is to explore Caputo's folding of the il/logic of the *sans* onto the discourses of ethics and religion. The extent to which the analyses below are correctly understood with respect to this il/logic will determine both the stakes involved in (and the efficacy of) Caputo's contribution to continental philosophy of religion and theology in general. Simultaneously and just as important, these investigations continue to clarify the ethical-political implications for the theme of sovereignty in particular and, therefore, the gradual development of a radical theology that is politically conscious.

## II. Postmodernism, Derrida and *Différance*

### I. Postmodernism

The story of the distinction between the modern and postmodern is variable, complex, and thus contested, with numerous attempts being made to articulate the kind of transformational epoch that we are experiencing.<sup>417</sup> This transformation, can be characterized by either a radicalization of elements already seen within what we would call modernity, or could represent a radical disjuncture or break from the thinking of the past. For example, Jean-François Lyotard, one of the first to recognize these changes, memorably extended Kant's analysis of the sublime in *Critique of Judgement*.<sup>418</sup> While Lyotard was narrating within the

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<sup>417</sup> For an account of how such a transformation takes place through the lens of a culturally sensitive hermeneutics, see Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), see part two in particular, pp. 61-116. For classic texts in this regard, see Charles Taylor's magnum opus, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Talal Assad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) and José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

<sup>418</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, Geoffrey Bennington & Brian Massumi (trans.) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). For his reading of Kant's aesthetics see Jean-François Lyotard, Elizabeth Rottenberg (trans.) *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgement*,

tradition in order to re-describe it, other thinkers saw the postmodern in terms that sought a far more diachronic disjuncture with the modern captured by words like “rupture,” “break” and “event.” The latter has often been associated with Michel de Certeau, Emmanuel Levinas and indeed, Jacques Derrida, though as we will see below this ‘anti-modern’ reading (at least in the case of Derrida) is a *misreading* of the employment of deconstruction. To keep the discussion of postmodernism within the bounds of a manageable scope, we must restrict it here to the realm of philosophy and religion, which is also to say one should recognize that what is called ‘postmodern’ ran itself into other (mostly aesthetic) fields too; architecture, art, literary studies, but also political theory and cultural studies.

In relation to philosophy and religion, it can be said minimally that the postmodern was a reaction to the thinking that had at its roots the Newtonian-Cartesian humanism of the Enlightenment. Postmodernism charges the self-awareness in this tradition, which is supposedly obvious and evident, as being more a product of ideological construction than the humanist would like to admit. At the same time, internal to modernity itself, the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries understood this unqualified positivism not necessarily as an emancipation from religious medieval primitivism, but in fact as a hindrance to full human potential. Science and reason alone were unable to provide ‘something more.’ Romanticism, in its own reactionary gesture, looked to find transcendence in nature and art which could be linked with the transcendence of the beyond. This form of aesthetic transcendentalizing proved itself to be inadequate, for it required a teleo-logic – an end point or goal with which one could ultimately commune. Romanticism and the transcendental idealist tradition inaugurated by Kant reproduced the very thing that it had set out to reject, a logic of sameness mirrored on the image of the human being. The picture that Kant had left was one of abstraction and *a priori* thinking. Kantian ethics and morality had ‘form’ but lacked the content of concrete social and ethical life embedded in historical community. In response, Georg W. F. Hegel saw in Romanticism’s desire to transcend itself, the very act of transcending which allowed the realization of a truer-self. This could only occur, however, if Reason’s necessity was to unfold in time and historical circumstance, and in a continual dialectical process of self-transcendence – which is what he meant by ‘Absolute Spirit.’ All this was to work itself out within immanence, that is, within the implicit potentiality of human

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23-29 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). See also, Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

life. The Hegelian dialectic had not only ‘immanentized’ the quest for transcendence, but it had also systematized it.<sup>419</sup>

The “System” of historical unfolding of Reason had domesticated religious faith according to the protestations of the proto-postmodern prophet, Søren Kierkegaard.<sup>420</sup> Christendom had neglected a more authentic faith of the ‘singular individual’ by reducing Christianity to the History of a relentless unfolding of rationality in time. Conversely, according to Kierkegaard, Christianity was to be understood as the suspension of time; not of time unfolding in an ‘imaginative representation’ (*Vorstellung*) but of the Eternal breaking *into* time. If Hegel offered a solution to what he called ‘the unhappy consciousness’<sup>421</sup> inherent in Romanticism’s reaction to modernity (through the immanent and continuous self-transcending of dialectic Spirit), and if Kierkegaard offered a ‘non-solution’ through the intensification of ‘unhappiness’ – the leap of faith into the Absurd – then it was Martin Heidegger who formalized this non-solution for philosophy. Caputo observes: “What Heidegger’s ‘existential analytic’ did with Kierkegaard in *Being and Time* can be variously described as *secularizing* Kierkegaard’s Christian-existential analysis by dropping the *religious* element, *formalizing* it by dropping the Christian *content* and *ontologizing* it by turning existence or being-possible into a feature or structure of our *Being*.”<sup>422</sup>

Heidegger, as we saw in the previous chapter, is one of the chief protagonists in the development of postmodernity for Jacques Derrida. If we recall, it was Heidegger’s ontological difference (Being-being) of which ‘the West’ had become forgetful. The forgetfulness of being, or rather, its difference constitutes the slippage of onto-theology, because it treats Being (God) as an object among beings. While the early Heidegger thought that we should return to the self-questionability of our own ‘being-toward-death’

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<sup>419</sup> This rapid account being given runs along a widely accepted tradition of reception, which finds the seeds of nationalistic movements in Romanticism. For three accounts often cited, liberal, conservative and Marxist see, respectively, Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism: The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* (1965); Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans* ([1933-38], 2003) and Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* ([1952], 1980). For an analysis which contests aspects of this narrative, see Jayne Svenungsson, Stephen Donovan (trans.) *Divining History: prophetism, messianism and the development of the spirit* (New York: Berghahn, [2014] 2016), pp. 64-104, 108-117.

<sup>420</sup> I am here following parts of an account Caputo has given in multiple publications. We have already encountered Kierkegaard in Caputo’s more scholarly *Radical Hermeneutics* and we will see more below in *Against Ethics*. For some more popular examples see his *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 49-55 and *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

<sup>421</sup> See “Chapter IV.B: Freedom of self-consciousness: Stoicism, Scepticism, and the Unhappy Consciousness” in Georg W. F. Hegel, A.V. Miller (trans.) *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 119-138.

<sup>422</sup> John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican, 2018), pg. 46, original emphasis. For the more scholarly account of Heidegger’s appropriation of Kierkegaard see chapter three of *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 60-92.

(Kierkegaard's standing before God), or as Caputo says, 'embracing the flux of existence,' the late Heidegger would become himself forgetful of the so-called 'hermeneutics of facticity' by seeking Being in its originary coming to presence in the manner of the early Greeks. Derrida would see in the charge that western thought had collapsed into onto-theologic, the same hegemony over thinking in Heidegger's mythology of originary Being.

Alternatively, for Derrida, postmodernism (though he would strategically never use this word to describe his work) would not forge ahead naively, leaving modernity in the past, but neither could it be an iconoclastic explosion of modern categories into synthetic plenitudes. To put it in the language of Heidegger, postmodernism for Derrida would not consist in retrieving the originary Being of beings or the dissolution of being, but rather in the honoring of *difference* between them as such.<sup>423</sup> Given this reading, which will be further clarified throughout the remainder of this study, Derrida would concur with Lyotard's description of the postmodern: it "is not a new age, it is the rewriting of some features modernity had tried or pretended to gain ... But such a re-writing, as has already been said, was for a long time active within modernity itself."<sup>424</sup> Conscientious readers of Derrida will notice that almost all his writings are a constant *inter*-pretation with figures of the philosophical and literary canon, they are never approached from the outside, as it were, but always re-worked from within.

This brings us to the central contribution of Derrida to postmodern thought; deconstruction and that menacingly esoteric term, *différance*. It must be said, again, that these brief remarks are merely to prime the reader for the subsequent discussion that delves deeper into the various cites of Caputo's religious reading of deconstruction. Indeed, there are many lucid accounts that are of far greater nuance than the sketch provided below.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> The distinction has not been made in the text, but it is worth mentioning the intentional use of the word 'postmodern' or 'postmodernism' in opposition to 'postmodernity.' The former denotes the critical stance to the modern that has been described in this section and which constitutes not a hard break with modernity but is rather a continuous moment in contemporary thought. Postmodernity, however, might be described as the way to name certain cultural conditions in which postmodernism as a philosophical position becomes possible. As a 'period concept', Graham Ward suggests, there seem to be indications that it is no longer a cultural emphasis as it was, say, in the 1970's and 1980's. For more on the postmodern-postmodernity distinction see Ward in his editor's "Introduction" to *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. xxii-xxvi.

<sup>424</sup> See Jean François Lyotard, "Rewriting Modernity" in Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby (trans.), *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pg. 34.

<sup>425</sup> A sampling of introductions to Derrida's thought might include: Caputo's acclaimed, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), where his extensive commentary follows a roundtable discussion with Derrida. See also, Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993) and Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

## II. Derrida

Derrida's earlier work was intimately involved in discussions related to structuralist theories of language and phenomenological accounts of meaning.<sup>426</sup> In these early writings, Derrida controversially argued that the way meaning had traditionally been constituted assumed a realm of 'ideality' which could be found behind language or text.<sup>427</sup> For him, this is expressed in the long Western tradition going back to Plato, where speech was given priority over writing.<sup>428</sup> The former allows immediate access to meaning by virtue of its presence in actual present time, while writing, on the other hand, is susceptible to numerous interpretations, translation errors, and false contextual readings such that it could not be trusted to maintain the author's original intention over the course of history. This preference afforded to immediacy of meaning, which Derrida called a 'metaphysics of presence' and 'logocentrism' (and which is essentially his chief debt to Heidegger),<sup>429</sup> is to be understood as illusory. For even the claim itself – that ideal meaning exists in a pure realm of thought – would have to be constructed with a series of words and sentences that necessarily take time to construct and make intelligible. Deconstruction, therefore, involves a strategic reversal of the speech-writing dyad. If the idea that pure meaning exists and can be communicated by speech, and that this *very* idea must be communicated by the construction of intelligible sentences, then it

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<sup>426</sup> The philosophy that was in vogue in Paris of the 1950's and 60's was phenomenology, and Derrida was deeply influenced by this way of doing philosophy. His Master's thesis (*Mémoire*) from 1953-54, though only published in 1990, was an intensive study of Husserl. See *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy* (2003). See also his three early essays, originally published in French in 1967: *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), as well as *Dissemination* (1972) and *Margins of Philosophy* (1972).

<sup>427</sup> The height of controversy over Derrida's work culminated in the so-called 'Cambridge Affair.' On the occasion of awarding Derrida an honorary degree, 204 academics at Cambridge University attempted to block the award by signing a petition. After Derrida was eventually awarded the degree an interview was published in which he reflected on the events that took place: See Jacques Derrida, Christopher Johnson and Marian Jeanneret (trans.) "An 'Interview' with Jacques Derrida" in *The Cambridge Review* 113, no. 2318 (Oct, 1992), pp. 131-139. This reflection was also collected in Jacques Derrida, Elisabeth Weber (ed.) *Points* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), where he describes the various misrepresentations of his work, see pp. 422-54.

<sup>428</sup> There have been a number of critical voices directed toward Derrida's reading of Plato, perhaps the most trenchant, yet deeply nuanced reading from a theological perspective is Catherine Pickstock, in her seminal publication, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (London: Blackwell, 1998). For a defense of Derrida from the critiques of Pickstock as well as John Milbank, see Guy Collins, "Defending Derrida: A Response to Milbank and Pickstock" in *Scottish Journal of Philosophy* 54.3 (Aug, 2001), pp. 344-365.

<sup>429</sup> The previous chapter noted the privileging of presence that required questioning within the Western tradition, which is what Heidegger meant by *Destruktion*. The sense of radical questioning of this metaphysics of presence is what Derrida borrows from Heidegger with his deployment of the word 'deconstruction.' However, Derrida would be less sympathetic toward the mythological operation in Heidegger, which enacts a logic of reversal that attempts to peel away history to get to a supposed kernel of originary thought. Deconstruction, rather, is not something to be 'applied' to the tradition, it is rather a function of it, an inherent dynamic in language that announces itself, and toward which are to be attentive. In a rare piece of lucid text, "A Letter to a Japanese Friend" (1983), Derrida clarifies what he means: "deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique* ... It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*...No more is it a critique, in a general or in a Kantian sense. The instance of *krinein* or *krisis* (decision, choice, judgement, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential 'themes' and 'objects' of deconstruction." See Jacques Derrida "A Letter to a Japanese Friend" in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pg. 3.



is not speech *contra* writing that holds the key to understanding meaning, but rather writing itself. The only way to get at any unified meaning would be through language. But language itself is not a single thing, it arises out of a series of distinctions between letters, words and sentences, and only in relation to *other* letters, words or sentences, can it communicate any constructed sense or meaning. The implications of this are clear: if meaning does not exist 'ideally' but is a construction, it can also be 'deconstructed.' Any assumed unity of meaning, therefore, is in fact an act of faith. Steven Shakespeare puts it well: "Even if a speaker feels absolutely sure of their meaning and the words chosen to express them, they are entering into *a pact with language* that preceded them, and with multiple future contexts they cannot control."<sup>430</sup>

The decisive (and divisive) move within deconstruction — which those who would charge Derrida for being an anti-modernist consistently neglect — is that this skepticism over presence or ideal meaning is not an arbitrary assertion as if his point was merely to disrupt for the sake of disruption. Rather, and here is announced something of the strange 'logic' of deconstruction, Derrida sees the possibility of disruption as constitutive of the very thing it is disrupting. In the example of speech and writing, we see that the seemingly displaced element (writing) is not only difficult to eradicate with respect to ideal speech, but in fact reappears at the very center of speech. This dyadic structure of that which perceives itself to be the center, only to be disrupted by the very thing that makes it possible, is what Derrida 'performs' throughout his writing, thereby demonstrating deconstruction as a process or performance rather than a 'concept' to be grasped or apprehended. One can also observe the tension that begins to emerge here with respect to Christianity and Judaism. The Greek preference for the Word (logos) that makes its way into Christianity, condemns the 'dead-letter' (St. Paul) of the Jewish tradition, and so the concern for hierarchies and the way power accumulates is one of the main concerns of deconstruction, as we will see especially with Caputo's reading of religion.

### III. *Différance*

But how does one name this 'logic' or performance where the center or hierarchal element (presence, logos) is invaded by the periphery, not simply to replace it but to exhibit its instability? Derrida turns to the misspelled word *différance* to signal this penetration of

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<sup>430</sup> Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, pg. 24. Emphasis added.

sameness by difference without the latter simply replacing the former. The disruption of presence or ideal meaning, we have seen, has to do with time and space. The French terms to 'differ' and 'defer,' which we can also hear in English, Derrida combines into a newly coined word, *différance*. Through this coinage he is able to signal simultaneously the structure of temporal delay and spatial difference. However, it may be asked, is not the nomination of temporal delay and spatial difference by the word '*différance*' committing itself to the danger of having named a new origin, transcendental idea, organizing principle or an *Ursprache* for deconstruction? The implications of this question are diverted by Derrida because he claims that the word *différance* itself resists ultimate phonic or semantic certainty. We are always uncertain of its pronunciation as well as if it is at any one time referring to the temporal act of 'deference' or the spatiality of 'difference'. Rather, we can say that it describes neither an origin nor a transcendental, but rather a *process* of time and change. Through this creative word-play, Derrida paradoxically offers a description of the periphery *as* the origin and writing *as* the speech.<sup>431</sup>

As an important segue-way into Caputo's argument in *Against Ethics*, a consideration of Derrida's reading of Husserl, first from his introduction to the latter's *Origins of Geometry* and then from *Speech and Phenomena*, will help to clarify the notion of *différance* and will begin to indicate its relation with autonomous subjectivity — arguably the apogee of tension between the modern and postmodern.<sup>432</sup> However, although it is often said that the postmodern obliterates the autonomous subject, we will see that this is only half the story with respect to Caputo and Derrida.

The place of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is fundamental to the development of continental philosophy in the twentieth century. His project of establishing phenomenology as a fundamental science can, in many ways, be considered as a major forerunner in the development of postmodern continental philosophy of religion. It was in this milieu of Husserl's phenomenology that Derrida began his early investigations into language.<sup>433</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Derrida elaborated this word in various places throughout his oeuvre, most notably see Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) *Positions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), Jacques Derrida, David B. Allison & Newton Garver (trans.) *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and "Différance" in Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

<sup>432</sup> For the technical discussion from which the description below is drawn, see Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 120-152.

<sup>433</sup> The influence of Husserl's work is, of course, not limited to Derrida but includes many others: from Heidegger (a former student), to Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, to name only a few prominent figures.

Husserl inaugurates a genuine attempt to move beyond the instability of Kant and Neo-Kantianism that had dominated German philosophy for so long. The problem that Husserl wanted to attend to, which the tradition set out by Kant had left ultimately unresolved, was how to *know* the knowing self. Kant had sought to resolve the dilemma between experience (objectivity) and the knowing subject (subjectivity) by articulating that the former could only become known by means of the application of a priori principles by the latter. These principles were carried out by the transcendental ego in order to make objective knowledge possible, but crucially, the ego itself could not be known as such. To remedy the instability of these claims – like how the objective truth of mathematical theorems comes to be true for the transcendental ego – Husserl turned to phenomenology, that is, to the way in which ‘phenomena’ appear to consciousness. This would entail turning the transcendental ego itself into the object of intuition.

Husserl’s solution was that meaning and objective truth were constituted by an immediately self-present subjectivity. However, this still raised a tension within phenomenology, namely, the relationship between the self-present Self and time. If the Self is immediately present to itself then it would follow that the Self constitutes time without the need for the empirical phenomena of worldly time. Sensitive to this tension, Husserl says that within the concept of the Self there still remains an experience of ‘protention’ and ‘retention’, future and past, so that the Self can still articulate ideal truth to itself. Geometric truth, for example, which is an objective ideal, needs to be discovered in historical time and then can be communicated by language and continually rediscovered by the reactivation of its ideal meaning. But, as we saw above, Derrida’s understanding of language would betray the stability of communicated meaning in Husserl’s theory of constitution. In these initial observations from his introduction to the *Origin of Geometry*, Derrida is hesitant about the possibility of pure ideality that requires time and language. This is because time and language are also precisely pure ideality’s ‘condition of impossibility’ – they make ideal meaning but also, because of *différance*, they exceed and therefore also ‘unmake’ it. Consequently, Derrida subjects Husserl’s desire for a transcendental history with what Caputo calls a “grammatological reduction” – the necessary work of language in the communication of ideal meaning.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pg. 123 and for the rest of Derrida’s reading of the *Origin of Geometry* see pp. 123-130.

To extend this initial critique of phenomenology, Derrida turns more explicitly to Husserl's theory of signs in *Speech and Phenomena*, but now having satisfied a delimitation of transcendental a priori *history*, he wants to show that even the monological interiority of transcendental consciousness also requires signs to produce meaning. By this move Derrida will radically expose the Western tradition of subjectivity in a way that marks a turning point in the trajectory of continental philosophy, which is possibly why, as Caputo comments, "he [Derrida] described *Speech and Phenomena* as the work he valued most."<sup>435</sup>

Husserl distinguishes between two modes of the sign, the indication (*Anzeigen*) and the expression (*Ausdruck*). In the former, meaning is contingent to an external reality that the sign represents, but in the latter meaning can be immediately present to consciousness to the extent that it is directed toward an ideal object. Signs as expressions are the closest form to pure communicated meaning of interior transcendental life.<sup>436</sup> In this theory of signification Derrida argues that for Husserl the sign as expression is able alone to communicate the idea of full self-presence, but only by denying the essential nature of the sign, that is, the possibility of repetition. For Derrida, the very nature of the sign is that it must be repeatable in order to carry meaning across time, otherwise it would be a momentary occurrence that could never be known. The paradox and irony that Husserl's theory establishes is that in order to make the distinction between full-intuited ideal meaning and empirical reality one would need the communicated repeatability of signs, but if this is so, then one would lose the sense of ideal meaning because the very nature of signs is their repeatability, which is needed in order to communicate that 'ideal' meaning.<sup>437</sup>

To bring this discussion above the surface of semiotics, one can discern some initial consequences of Derrida's critique and radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology for subjectivity. The Cartesian declaration "I am" is instructive.<sup>438</sup> To say 'I am' takes both time to say and requires the use of language. The "I" is not immediately present in pure self-presence, otherwise we would not be able to say it. Husserl wanted to distinguish between pure internal speech unaffected by empirical realities. Such a view of subjectivity, however, only silences speech and leaves it unknown (mute). According to Derrida, the notion of difference and time (*différance*) goes to the core of properly articulating the self. In order to be able to have

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., pg. 131.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., pp. 131-132.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-138.

<sup>438</sup> Derrida is of course writing with reference to Husserl's later work which is called *Cartesian Meditations* (1931), following René Descartes.

subjectivity, an “I am,” we need time to say it, and the signs we use need to be repeatable to secure it as a recognizable meaning. By this quasi-logic of *différance*, Derrida complicates the notion of origins and binaries. In the case of subjectivity what becomes evident is that the sovereign self is not the starting point, but is rather an effect of a spatial and temporal production. The self, according to *différance*, is a product of repetition, viz., “Repetition as a nonoriginary origin.”<sup>439</sup> However, *différance* is not a new transcendental ‘in a strict Kantian sense,’ as we have seen above, it is at best a *quasi*-transcendental because insofar as it is the condition for meaning, it is also the condition for unmeaning, that is, meaning *sans* meaning – the il/logic of the *sans*.

To further engage the results of Derrida’s postmodern interpretation of Husserl and to locate it with respect to other sources, we turn now to Caputo’s reading of ethical subjectivity in *Against Ethics*.

### III. Ethics *sans* Ethics

Caputo’s early career had been spent wrestling with and critiquing various received paradigms of modernity. From the start he had begun with religion (with which he was most familiar)<sup>440</sup> by attempting to bring to an end neo-Thomist readings of Heidegger which claimed to circumvent the charge of *Seinsvergessenheit*.<sup>441</sup> He argued one would have to read Aquinas through a certain Heideggerian Meister Eckhart.<sup>442</sup> Then from the late 80’s – coinciding with the rise of the French postmodernists and newly introduced philosophical as well as historical critiques of Heidegger’s association with the National Socialists – he began his long relationship with Derrida, which culminated simultaneously in a critique of hermeneutics and phenomenology and a more *radical* affirmation of hermeneutics more generally.<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Ibid., pg. 139.

<sup>440</sup> In his quasi-biography, *Hoping Against Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), Caputo tells of his early life in the ‘bosom of the Catholic Church,’ having been an altar boy, attending a Catholic school, and subsequently entering the Novitiate before joining a Catholic order called “De LaSalle Brothers” (or the *Fratres Scholarum Christianarum* F.S.C. “The Brothers of the Christian Schools”), which he left after his undergraduate studies to pursue academia. Reflecting on these years Caputo writes, “I had decided to leave the De LaSalle Brothers to pursue the life of the philosopher. But as it turned out, my religious life followed me out the door and pursued me the rest of my life, unless it was I who pursued it.” Pg. 104.

<sup>441</sup> See chapter three above.

<sup>442</sup> See Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (1978)

<sup>443</sup> See Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987)

After experimenting in the concluding chapters of *Radical Hermeneutics* with an ‘ethics of dissemination,’ coupled with his no simple departure from Heidegger in the early 90’s<sup>444</sup> – an effort in part to reenergize the suppressed ‘jewish’ element in the latter’s thought – Caputo resolved to take on the question of ethics. If anything, these examples indicate that Caputo is certainly no polemicist and that his work always involves a ‘double movement’ or affirmation. That this is no less the case in *Against Ethics*, therefore, should come as no surprise. The project of an ethics *sans* ethics arrives at a point where Caputo needed to interrogate a space that his work up to that point had left without substantial content. The earlier delimitations of the mythological narrative of Being’s *Anfang* indicated how Heidegger had left out the thematics of justice and mercy in his narrow reading of the New Testament. Coupled with this, the influence of the postmodernists like Derrida and Lyotard – who offered resources toward his ‘ethics of dissemination’ – was still somewhat controversial in the intellectual climate of the early nineties. It followed, then, that the Heideggerian break and the Derridian embrace he had pursued required a thicker (ethical) description.

*Against Ethics* can be read not only as an attempt to provide an answer in the midst of this historical-philosophical milieu, but also as a logical step in the context of Caputo’s own project. More specifically, for our purposes, the significance of *Against Ethics* is revealed in a tense distinction between two sets of postmodern sources, (heteromorphism vs. heteronomism) which render a synthesis (though not of a Hegelian sort) with respect to ethical subjectivity. In the midst of this tension, which holds together Nietzsche, Deleuze, Guattari on the one hand, and Levinas, Lyotard and Derrida on the other, Caputo inserts Kierkegaardian ‘undecidability.’ The aim of this undecidability is to keep this tension in place. However, as we will see below, in this publication the undecidable lapses into indecision due to a certain unintended and metaphysical Nietzschean-tragic arc with which Caputo frames his discussion. Although from the beginning it is stated that “Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the difficulty,”<sup>445</sup> an uneasy preference for Nietzschean faith over Kierkegaardian faith is discerned throughout the text. Caputo goes on to later admit that he underplayed the *Derridian* undecidability between these positions.<sup>446</sup> In the third and final section of the chapter, it is suggested that only a Derridian-religious reformulation of this argument as set out in *Prayers and Tears*, can adequately approximate not only his position on ethics but also on religious faith.

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<sup>444</sup> See Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993)

<sup>445</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 5.

<sup>446</sup> See Keith Putt, “What do I love when I love my God? An Interview with John D. Caputo” in James H. Olthuis (ed.) *Religion with/out Religion: the prayers and tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 155-157.



## I. *Against Ethics*

Caputo tersely declares that he has had it with ethics.<sup>447</sup> Ethical foundationalism, emblematically represented by Kant and contemporary Kantians, as well as ethical theories of value are all shortcuts. They do not take adequate account of the facticity and hermeneutic situatedness of life. More importantly, moral action being derived from Law produces the solipsistic and auto-authenticating monological self: “the law that reason obeys is reason’s own law, so it does not ... bend its knee to anything ‘other’ (*heteros*) but offers its respects to itself (*autos*), like man bowing to himself in the mirror.”<sup>448</sup> Instead, he is interested in obligation, which “is a kind of *skandalon* for ethics, which makes ethics blush, which ethics must reject or expel in order to maintain its good name, for ethics is ‘philosophy,’ a certain *episteme*.”<sup>449</sup> Following Lyotard, Levinas, and Kierkegaard’s Abraham, obligation is not a prescription but something that ‘happens’ to us, it gives (*es gibt*) itself. We are always “necessarily structurally, on the receiving end of a command, dominated by its transcendence, blinded by its power.”<sup>450</sup> Where ethics subsists in the element of autonomy, it says ‘I can’ (*ich kann*), where an ethics of obligation subsists in the element of heteronomy, it says ‘here I am’ (*me voici*). But Caputo quickly voices his reservations about an infinite transcendence; Levinas is “too pious,” he writes, too caught up in a description of infinity that suffocates us.<sup>451</sup> To this Caputo introduces a Nietzschean ‘impiety’; the tragic disinterest of the expanding cosmos to the fate of mortal humanity. It is worth citing the famous text he quotes from *Will to Power* (1901) in full:

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of “world history,” but nevertheless it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 1.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., pg. 13.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., pg. 5.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., pg. 14.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., pg. 19.

<sup>452</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, Daniel Breazeale (ed. & trans.) *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979), pg. 79, cited in Ibid., pg. 16.

This becomes, as Merold Westphal notes, something of a credo for Caputo.<sup>453</sup> We can never be content with ethics, not even with Levinas's pious infinity, for when "you and I stand on the surface of the little star and shout, 'racism is unjust.' The cosmos yawns and takes another spin."<sup>454</sup> Obligation must, therefore, fend for itself without the securities of ethics or the infinity that surpasses totality. The problem with Caputo's pronouncement here is that it comes across as a dogmatic statement, that the reality is we are all going to die and there is nothing beyond this reality. The more deconstructive answer would have been to say that this is but another *interpretation* that we must continue to confront. As mentioned above, this is an unintended consequence of the way he has structured his argument because at other times he seems to adopt a more agnostic stance. For example, drawing from Blanchot he associates obligation with the 'disaster,' but points out that he wants to distinguish from Blanchot by not talking about 'the disaster' of obligation in the singular, but rather of 'disasters', in the plural. On this reading, it is not the one, singular (cosmological) meta-disaster out of which obligation arises, but rather "concrete and actual disasters, the sort that *can* be measured in terms of failure, loss, and catastrophic destruction." He goes further; "*What is a disaster?... Is it the voice of God sounding through the little ones of the earth? Or is it nothing more than the rumble of cosmic forces...signifying nothing? I do not know. It is beyond me.*"<sup>455</sup>

## II. Heteromorphism vs Heteronomism

The drowning out of the Kierkegaardian undecidable against the back-drop of the Nietzschean disaster meta-narrative should be understood as a unique postmodern tension which – contra Kantian *a priori* transcendentalism and Hegelian suppression of difference – constitutes Caputo's vision for ethical subjectivity. In chapter three of *Against Ethics*, "Dionysus vs. The Rabbi,"<sup>456</sup> Caputo stages the dichotomy of postmodern sources of difference that attract his sympathies. They are composed, on the one hand, of the 'eruptive rupture' of energies of the 'heteromorphosists,' and on the other, by the 'disruptive ruptures' of something *alter* and foreign of the 'heteronomologists'. Both are of equal importance, for both offer unique philosophies of difference. But it is clear that Caputo doesn't want to have to decide between the two.<sup>457</sup> Heteromorphism is marked by the celebration of pluralities. The

<sup>453</sup> See Merold Westphal, "Review Essay" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23.4 (1997), pg. 94.

<sup>454</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 17.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., pg. 28.

<sup>456</sup> The title of the chapter is a deliberate reference to Derrida's 1964 essay, where he distinguishes between 'the Jew' and 'the poet.' See Jacques Derrida, "Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book" in Alan Bass (ed. & trans.) *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 77-96.

<sup>457</sup> Caputo notes that he is making a similar analogy here to that identified by Edith Wyschogrod, where in postmodernism there exists a 'fault line' between philosophies of difference (Derrida, Levinas, Blanchot) and

chief figure of this point of view, whose argument is “the opening and perhaps even defining gesture of poststructuralism,”<sup>458</sup> is Derrida’s contemporary Gilles Deleuze.<sup>459</sup> Deleuze affirms affirmation, that is, a philosophy of affirmation that rejects any construction of subjectivity that places the will under surveillance or binds it to some mode of being or action. Instead of a ‘reactive will’ which responds and is a function of other forces, a philosophy of affirmation issues out of pure willing, untethered by anything that might hold it down. “In the philosophy of affirmation Being, truth, and reality are nothing more than inventions of the will, nothing more than fictions...The active will can never suffer the pain of opposition [referring to Hegelian negation]; it never groans under the weight of Being.”<sup>460</sup> The will that affirms nothing other than itself, indeed, affirms nothing *other* but itself. Being *is* affirmation. What it means ‘to be’ means to affirm affirmation or *becoming*. It is in this entropic subjective dissipation that the sense of Nietzsche’s Dionysian dance is recognized.

For Caputo, and others who have correctly pointed out, this version of Nietzsche that Deleuze espouses is shot through with metaphysical weight. It may deny reactive forces that attempt to enslave the will, it may deliver an even greater plurality of voices, but these voices speak only insofar as the will has willed the speaking. There is in Deleuze, ultimately, a metaphysical slippage into a solipsism of pure unmediated act of willing. Caputo welcomes this ‘style’<sup>461</sup> of Nietzsche, in as much as it resists totalizing forces through the affirmation of the differential. However, again, he is haunted by the more tragic Nietzschean vision – the “distrastromical Nietzsche, the one for whom ‘difference’ does not mean the gay play of egalitarian forces”<sup>462</sup> which tries to evade the negation of opposites, but rather the Nietzsche which “embraces opposition ‘tragically,’ to an ‘extreme’ that makes dialectical progress absurd.”<sup>463</sup> Deleuze misunderstands Nietzsche according to Caputo, because he thinks Nietzsche’s objection to Hegel is that the latter conceived difference in terms of opposition, when in fact, it is not opposition that Nietzsche rejects, but rather its rationalization. Instead, Nietzsche wants to ‘aesthetically justify’ opposition, that is, to embrace the “merciless

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philosophies of plenum (Deleuze, Guattari, Genet). See Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990). Crucially for Caputo, as the trajectory of this study will show, he argues that Derrida (along with Lyotard) is not so easily classified as a philosopher of difference, but should rather be situated in between. See Caputo’s footnote, *Against Ethics*, fn. 63. pg. 263.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., pg. 44.

<sup>459</sup> Caputo draws from Deleuze’s infamous study, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962). See Gilles Deleuze, Hugh Tomlinson (trans.) *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., pg. 45.

<sup>461</sup> As Derrida reminds, there are indeed various ways, ‘styles’, to read Nietzsche; see Jacques Derrida, Barbara Harlow (trans.) *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978).

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., pg. 49.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

destruction of whatever is produced” by the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>464</sup> On this more radicalized version of Nietzsche, Caputo recognizes an equally totalizing tendency of thought, similar to Hegel but in the opposite (negative) direction. We embrace the totality of the disaster, and only through brief moments of beauty (aesthetics) or divinization (*Vergötterung*) is the tragedy in this drama justified.

The ecstatic, disseminative trajectory of the Deleuzian subject, which resists the ‘order of rank’ in favor of a more democratic and egalitarian de-divinized anarchy of forces is undermined not only by a too autonomic and metaphysical solipsism, but also by the tragic embrace of meaningless opposition or negation. To be clear: for Caputo, this first heteromorphic influence of ethical subjectivity 1) contributes to an affirmation of difference that rejects the fallacy of external forces (God, Law, etc.) that coerce and enslave. 2) Because of the ‘purity’ of will and act in this view, Deleuze’s Nietzsche is tempered by a more radical Nietzsche who does not disapprove of Hegelian dialectics as such, but rather the rationalization of difference conceived as opposition. 3) In response, Nietzsche is recovered in the name of a less joyous celebration of difference that replaces opposition by a more tragic embrace of the destructive effects of negation. What these positions clearly neglect, however, is a proper concern for what is other: “heteromorphic pluralism is in fact quietly stealing away from the other...If Deleuze wants difference without the opposition of the other, Nietzsche loves the battle with the other.”<sup>465</sup>

Heteromorphic subjectivity is characterized by a phallogentric ‘discharge’, ‘overflow’ and ‘plenitude’ from the eruptive ruptures of internal energies. Conversely, *heteronomism* is almost its exact opposite. In heteronomic subjectivity, autonomy is disrupted not internally but from without. Here, *pace* Deleuze, the subject is not God as in *actus purus* but rather ‘held hostage’ by the other, to let the other come over me and to let the other speak. Caputo formulates the tension in this way:

The difference...is the difference between *alius* and *alter*. *Alius* means different in the sense of *diversitas*, *discepanis*, *dissension*. Different people do different things (*alii alia faciunt*), and they do them differently (*aliter*). *Alius* is very heteromorphic. *Alter*, on the other hand, means the other one of two, *the* other one, with a force of singularity, not

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., pg. 51.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., pg. 56.

multiplicity, not one more among many others, but just one, just that one, over there.

Alterity means being one-on-one with the other (*der Andere*).<sup>466</sup>

Heteronomic subjectivity here has a clear Abrahamic veneer, insofar as it is posited under the law (*nomos*) – the law of obligation.<sup>467</sup> In this context, it follows that the crucial influences for heteronomic difference are the ‘jewish-rabbinic’ figures (as Caputo calls them) of Lyotard, Derrida and Levinas. Levinas is central for both Lyotard and Derrida, but they are different in that they also respect the plurality of difference, whereas in Levinas, Caputo attributes a certain “neo-Neoplatonism of being-to-excess which lacks the restraint of *différance*.”<sup>468</sup> Caputo locates his own vision for ethics in between Deleuze-Nietzsche and Levinas, a ‘Dionysiac rabbi,’ he says, but without a desire to synthesize the two into a higher unity. The ‘jewgreek’ combination of these postmodern sources that he wants to advance for his description of ethical subjectivity is, therefore, an amalgamation of Lyotard and Derrida, who for him balance the heteromorphic and heteronomic positions of postmodern difference. “Deconstruction,” he writes, “is excessively heteromorphic, and not a little heteronomic.”<sup>469</sup>

Given the plurality of forces that make up who we are (who am I?), and the situations that call upon us from the other (here I am!), how are we to act? The problem of ethical action is the classic problem of judgement, which is to ask the question: how one is to judge? In chapter five of *Against Ethics*, Caputo turns to Lyotard and Aristotle to set-up the problematic of Aristotelean *phronesis*. In the paradigm of *phronesis* the singularity of the situation (the event)<sup>470</sup> “requires the discernment to see how the law is to be brought to bear upon it.”<sup>471</sup> But the ‘bringing to bear of the law’ invites an application of the law that is still too Aristotelian, even Gadamerian Caputo notes.<sup>472</sup> The situation which requires action but without the road map of a law with which to apply the action is an ‘aporia’ and recalls Derrida’s famous “Force

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid., pg. 60.

<sup>467</sup> For a discussion of the *me voici* (‘here I am’) which responds in the accusative to this law/obligation see Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonse Lingis (trans.) *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 140-152.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid., pg. 63. For Caputo’s critique of Levinas, *inter alia*, see John D. Caputo, “Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth, and Politics” in *Research in Phenomenology* 21 (1991), pp. 3-20, which also appears partly as chapter ten of *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993). It also appears in *Prayers and Tears*, which we will encounter below.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., pg. 72.

<sup>470</sup> We will return to the ‘event’ below. For now, we can note that in *Against Ethics*, Caputo is sympathetic to the sense of the event Lyotard offers in *The Differend* (1983), where the whole axiomatic of the event is presented around the event of Auschwitz. Here the event is searching for an idiom to present itself in the midst of suffering. See Jean-François Lyotard, Georges Van Den Abbeele, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1988). See also, Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). There is also a philosophy of events in Deleuze, see Gilles Deleuze, Mark Lester, Charles Stivale (trans.) and Constantin Boundas (ed.) *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>471</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 117.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid., pg. 104.

of Law" (1989)<sup>473</sup> essay. Derrida distinguished between law (*droit*) which is deconstructible and justice (*justice*) which is undeconstructible, in order to argue that our juridical systems need to be constantly tested by notions of justice that cannot be assimilated to them. To act requires a 'moment of decision,' an Abrahamic 'decision of madness'. Through Derrida's reference to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Caputo raises the importance of the category of the 'singular individual' as it is being led into the abyss of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical.'<sup>474</sup> To act is to 'leap.' It is to take a leap of faith into the abyss according to an absurd 'jewgreek' logic. The decision may turn out to be a catastrophe — after all we do not have a guide — but it is not indecision. Or is it?

The concept of sovereignty as it pertains to modern readings of autonomy is substantially re-written in this postmodern account of ethical subjectivity. Here the subject is not an essence which abides by predetermined or self-evident laws of action. Instead, one might say that the subject is a complex economy of 'active' or 'reactive' forces that might take on many different meanings. In this type of situational ethics, we are moved, on the one hand, to be *active* by resisting the forces that constrain our continual becoming, and on the other, to be *reactive* to the other who asks us to recognize who *they* are!<sup>475</sup> The Kierkegaardian move (which is Caputo's move and Derrida's) is not to be led to take a stance for either side, but to keep this aporia in tension. If the sheer breadth of these sources (which is still to say nothing of others like Descartes, Ockham,<sup>476</sup> Arendt,<sup>477</sup> Rabbi Moyses, Ibn Rashid<sup>478</sup> or Augustine<sup>479</sup>) has been to confound any decisive position on ethics, then Caputo's text would have achieved its performative affect. The text of *Against Ethics* is a dense cacophony of voices that illustrate Caputo's point with which he began: "Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the *difficulty*."<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Part of the essay was first presented at a colloquium "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice" at the Cordoza Law School in 1989. See Jacques Derrida "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67.

<sup>474</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 107.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., pg. 67.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., pg. 108.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., pg. 111.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., pg. 110.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., pg. 121-122.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., pg. 5. Emphasis added.



### III. *Anthropologia Negativa*

Caputo's account of ethics described above, seems to terminate in what might be called an '*anthropologia negativa*.' To be sure, when Caputo discusses the apophatic with respect to negative theology, he means a radical negation that opens up onto the possibility of something unexpected. Whether there is a movement of apotheosis or not, the point is always that we don't know and this non-knowing, as will become clear, is not paralyzing but impassioned.

In *Against Ethics*, however, while Caputo wants to keep the tension in place between the decision and the undecidable, the *effect* of this ethical *ignorantia* becomes indecision itself. This can be illustrated by the literary framing of his most poetically exuberant chapter. In chapter eight Caputo offers eight short essays by pseudonymous authors which re-read the story of Abraham. Mimicking Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) and *Fear and Trembling* (1843) the pseudonymous texts, he says, had been sent to him by mail and now he presents them to us the readers followed by his own commentary. The middle six essays are by female authors, Johanna de Silentio, Magdalena de la Cruz, and Rebecca Morgenstern, and introduce some feminist perspectives into Caputo's ruminations.<sup>481</sup> These authors try to invert the story from Sarah's point of view, exposing what Derrida called the 'carno-phallo-centrism' of other interpreters like Heidegger, Levinas and Kierkegaard.<sup>482</sup> While developing Derrida's distinction between law and justice they also pick up on his critique of Heidegger's Antigone and Heidegger's temples mostly notably from Derrida's *Glas* (1974). For our purposes, what is noteworthy is that these accounts emphasize the description of obligation from the displaced voice, the ones who suffer in Abraham's story. But the first and the last essays by 'Felix Sineculpa' (the only male voice) are meant as a Nietzschean reminder, "always [to] be heard in the background of the other discourses," reminding them that "[s]uffering happens...there is no Evil...no injustice, no guilt (*sine culpa*)."<sup>483</sup> And that "[s]uffering belongs to the violence of existence."<sup>483</sup> The conclusion is exemplary in this regard. Just at the moment when Caputo seems to have countered the negative impulse — "[n]o matter what Felix says, no matter what eternal thoughts have entered into his head, obligation happens"<sup>484</sup> — he reverts back to indecision; "the menacing figure of Felix Sineculpa is always hovering in the background and regularly disturbs my sleep."<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-186.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., pg. 145.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., pg. 138.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., pg. 192.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., pg. 193.

Ethical obligation is presented as a *perspectival* fact of the world – ‘it happens.’ But Nietzsche’s pronouncement of cosmic disaster is understood as the most fundamental *ontological* fact of the world.<sup>486</sup> Siding exclusively with obligation (Levinas) or cosmic meaninglessness (Nietzsche) would render the other deceived by the ‘reality’ of the world. This is why Caputo means to keep them together (Derrida). The attempt to straddle the tension between these the two positions ultimately fails rhetorically however. In the concluding chapter of *Against Ethics*, he writes “My Dionysian rabbi seems not to want to settle down in either Athens or Jerusalem but, if anything, to operate a shuttle between the two.”<sup>487</sup> Here a negative anthropology culminates in the inability to decide. Nietzsche wins the day.

Now, as indicated above, and as the reader will expect, Caputo never intends for this to be a dogmatic position. But the literary effect of an *anthropologia negativa* does not accomplish the type of Derridean undecidability he is aiming for in *Against Ethics*. Only in *Prayers and Tears* does the turn to a properly religious dimension of deconstruction ignite a more *affirmative* poeticizing of the human condition.<sup>488</sup>

## IV. Religion *sans* Religion

Around the time of *Against Ethics* Caputo published an essay on Michel Foucault titled, “On Not Knowing Who We Are.”<sup>489</sup> There he argued that Foucault’s hermeneutics can be best understood as an ‘apophatic hermeneutics’ that operates “according to what Jacques Derrida calls the logic of the *sans*.”<sup>490</sup> The disquiet for knowing, or indeed, an *anthropologia negativa* in Foucault is followed by the possibility for being *otherwise* – a Foucault *sans* Foucault that pushes “past a hermeneutics of refusal [of identity] to one of response and redress.”<sup>491</sup> The

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<sup>486</sup> Caputo confirms that he has perhaps collapsed the distinction between the tragic and *différance* in *Against Ethics* and possibly in *Radical Hermeneutics* too. See his response to Jamie Smith in James Olthuis (ed.) *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 132-134.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 233.

<sup>488</sup> See Derrida’s abandonment of the ethical (Levinas) in favor of the ‘structural’ commitment to the religious in the Kierkegaardian sense in Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 201-212.

<sup>489</sup> See John D. Caputo, “On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics, and the Night of Truth in Foucault,” in John D. Caputo and Mark Yount (eds.) *Foucault and the Critique of Institutions* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). The piece reappears as the lead essay in his follow up book *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 17-40.

<sup>490</sup> Caputo, “On Not Knowing Who We Are”, pg. 17. See also Thomas R. Flynn, who endorses and contests Caputo’s reading of Foucault, “Squaring the Hermeneutic Circle: Caputo as Reader of Foucault” in Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo In Focus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 175-194; For Caputo’s response, pp. 199.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 18.

movement of the apophatic in Foucault that precedes the affirmation or response, directly links with the sense of the apophatic that Caputo elucidates in Jacques Derrida. The connection is not simply idiosyncratic for Caputo; in *Prayers and Tears* he goes further to suggest that the apophatic in mystical theology serves as a general model or as he calls it a “generalized apophaticism,” without which “we cannot trust any discourse that is not contaminated” by it.<sup>492</sup> Foucault’s and Caputo’s apophatic anthropology are thus derived from the “wider translatability of negative theology.”<sup>493</sup>

In the final section of this chapter we explore the il/logic of the *sans* as it pertains to the site of negative theology in Derrida’s ‘religion *sans* religion.’ The relationship of deconstruction with negative theology in Derrida’s ‘religion’ displays not only the first explicit contact with theology, but more specifically characterizes the sense in which the sovereign Religion (Christianity) and the sovereign God are dislodged from their site of privilege and can, thus, be ‘translated’ into another vision of God as *Wholly Other*. This movement of negative theology is only a partial step to the even more affirmative gestures of Derrida’s religion. In the following chapter, we will bring to fore some of the other important themes in Derrida’s religion together with Caputo’s radical theology, for it is in that deeply affirmative space carved out in *Prayers and Tears* that Caputo is able to take his project even further into his later radical theology. For that discussion, it will be important to see Derrida’s ‘biblical, prophetic, Jewish side,’ which let’s go of the discourse of the apophatic (a largely Neo-Platonic one) and gets to the heart of a religion *without* religion, and thus a radical theology. As Caputo writes, “Derrida’s religion is more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists, more messianic and more eschatological than mystical.”<sup>494</sup> The distinctiveness of the ‘apophatic-prophetic’ tradition gives rise to Derrida’s famous deployment of the *apocalyptic* and *messianic*, where there is neither a dramatic apocalypse nor a Messiah that finally arrives. These tropes, along with a quasi-Augustinian confession (*circonfession*), render Derrida a certain *homo religiosus* – one that is neither explicitly Christian or Jewish, nor theistic or atheistic, but nonetheless affirmative in a certain ‘prophetic’ and ‘messianic’ sense. The passion or fervor and desire of that which comes – the event, the *impossible* – is precisely the religious kernel of Derrida’s religion *sans* religion. And it is here that Caputo claims, *perhaps*, a radical theology may be written which turns another corner in the (re)conception of sovereignty.

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<sup>492</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 23.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., pg. xxiv.

## I. The Apophatic

The apophatic discourse of ‘negative-speaking’ has long roots in the history of Western thought. It features prominently in thinkers from Plato, Pseudo-Dionysus, Meister Eckhart, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.<sup>495</sup> The importance of the apophatic for this discussion is twofold. First, for Caputo and Derrida as noted above, it acts as a kind of *avant la lettre* for deconstruction and thus points to a semiotic analogy between the two discourses. Secondly, if there exists a syntactical-linguistic relationship between the apophatic and deconstruction, to what extent are they ‘translatable’? This is to pose the question of the limits of negative theology for a religion *sans* religion. Here, the ‘negative’ of negative theology is not negative enough. Its ‘violent’ gesture is that it ultimately cannot refuse the temptation of predication. In this sense, Caputo seeks to ‘save’ (*sauf*) the name of God from negative theology by reminding us of Derrida’s formula that ‘every other is wholly other,’ and therefore every mention of God could also be otherwise – any other singularity whatsoever. Because apophatic discourse cannot recognize that meaning is a production of language itself, it grounds its linguistic attempts to name the unamenable in a non-linguistic reality, something that deconstruction confounds by the infinite platitudes of difference.

The ‘wounded language’ of the apophatic tradition – its desire to name the God which it cannot name, what Derrida called the *tout autre* – is “provocatively analogous” to the difficulty involved in naming *différance*.<sup>496</sup> Both seek the ‘impossible’ task of naming something which resists naming, where even the “‘detours, locutions, and syntax’ in which Derrida strives to mark off *différance* will resemble, almost to the point of indistinguishability, the twists and turns of negative theology.”<sup>497</sup> And yet, there is for Derrida still a world of difference between them. The doubt toward negative theology resides within its tendency toward a metaphysics of presence or what Caputo calls ‘hyperousiology.’ However, this is

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<sup>495</sup> For the main texts that Caputo is interested in see, Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” in Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (eds.) *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume II* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1987] 2008), pp. 143-195; Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pp. 6, 26-27; Jacques Derrida, Thomas Dutoit (ed.) *On The Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1993] 1995). Some of the essays relating to negative theology from these volumes were first collected in an earlier volume: see Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.) *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>496</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 2. The paradigmatic figure for Caputo of negative theology is Meister Eckhart, whom he had investigated at length with respect to Heidegger early on his career. See John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, [1978] 1986).

<sup>497</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 7. Caputo is quoting a famous passage often cited where Derrida directly distinguishes *différance* from negative theology. See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pg. 6.

not merely a description of simple 'presence' or 'onto-theo-logy.' Contrary to kataphatic theology which describes God through the language of representation and conceptual ratiocination, *hyper-ousiology* leaves out "all such representational paraphernalia and parerga in the vestibule" and enters "into a worldless, imageless, timeless inner sanctum of the temple."<sup>498</sup> In Caputo's in-depth study, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1978), he argued that the apophatic in Meister Eckhart came uniquely close to a "religious overcoming of metaphysics."<sup>499</sup> This entailed a suspension of all operations of the mind and will in order to 'let God be.' The latter is what Eckhart meant by *Gelassenheit* (letting-be), and is the word that Heidegger famously adopted in his later work.<sup>500</sup> But the limitation of negative theology in this movement of *aphresis* ('a taking away') in order to 'let-be', is that it does so in the name of a higher movement, *hênosis*, or mystical union with the Godhead. On this reading, Caputo asserts that negative theology is in fact a disguised or hidden version of an even higher (*hyper*) kataphatic theology.<sup>501</sup>

The difference between negative theology and *différance* is that the one desires to name that which leaves a trace of itself in language (God), while the other is the generative matrix that produces names as differential effects; God, G-d, or even *différance* itself. Where the two intersect for Derrida is in the fact that both are solicited by what he calls *the impossible*. Language is ruptured and disturbed by something that wants to shake off conventional

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid., pg. 11.

<sup>499</sup> Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, pg. xviii.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-134, 173-182

<sup>501</sup> According to some, like Thomas Carlson, however, Caputo is not being generous enough to the fluctuations and tensions of mystical theology. Indeed, when Caputo says that the 'main work' of *Prayers and Tears* is 'to follow that more Jewish and religious turn' in Derrida, there seems to be an unfair weighting against negative theology. For Carlson, Caputo ignores the fact that some thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysius derive their names for God not from a Greek metaphysic but from the Jewish scriptures themselves. Additionally, Carlson argues that on Caputo's construal negation is merely a higher form of positive theologizing, whereas for someone like Pseudo-Dionysius, even negation is not enough, and thus there is an endless oscillation between the kataphatic and apophatic discourses resembling much of the 'desire and expectation' logic of deconstruction. See Thomas A. Carlson, "Caputo's Example" in Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in focus* (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), pp. 255-275. Caputo's response follows Carlson's contribution in this volume. His basic point is that when it comes down to being 'lost' the mystical writers cannot be said to escape *hyperousiology*, because they write in order to enter into a higher union. Negative theology "leaves the God of onto-theo-logic at the door *precisely in order to enter into a deeper relation with the Godhead beyond all representational discourse, positive or negative.*" See, pg. 277, original emphasis. See also Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 38-40. Additionally, given Caputo's attention to detail with regard to mysticism and Meister Eckhart in particular, it seems that his litmus test for attempts which seek to narrate their way out of the *hyperousiology* critique is above all, Martin Heidegger and his charge of *Seinvergesenheit*. The ambivalence felt here with respect to Caputo's construal of the relationship between negative theology and deconstruction should not be easily dismissed. Indeed, there is something of an admittance on Derrida's part of a more complicated association with negative theology. In the first "Religion and Postmodernism" conference at Villanova, Jean-Luc Marion says to Derrida: "I think that orthodox theology was in fact a powerful endeavor to deconstruct the naïve metaphysics of presence used by Arianism. In the situation, I would say, the part of deconstruction was played by the orthodox theologians." Derrida replies, "That is not surprising." See John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pg. 47.

structures of discourse. For him, this takes place as an event of language. The impossibility to name God or any other is possible only in virtue of *différance* as the *quasi*-transcendental. The failure of negative theology, by contrast, lies in the fact that it sees the impossibility to name the unnameable in something that is ultimately a non-linguistic ineffable Being. *Différance* as the unnameable is rather “the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relative unitary atomic structures that are called names.”<sup>502</sup>

Caputo demonstrates, thus, how Derrida delimits negative theology in a Heideggerian appeal to the nature of language and by his notion of *différance*. The aporia of ‘hyperousiology’ is that in affirming a unity with a positive infinite alterity, negative theology cannot avail itself of language because language would corrupt this intuition, and yet, it has already availed itself in the affirmation. Caputo then raises the inverse question, namely, what would be the case if one *were* to avail oneself of language and at the same time affirm a positive infinite alterity? This is what he calls, with respect to Derrida’s debate with Levinas, ‘Absolute Heterology.’<sup>503</sup> The content of this debate reveals another sense of *différance* that is crucial for the account of the apophatic.

Levinas’ project consists in a figure of subjectivity that also fiercely resists the modern conception of the ‘I’ as a self-constituted autonomy. In its place Levinas argues famously for a radical ethical relation with the other as the starting point for philosophy and subjectivity. The vulnerable face-to-face relation with the other is infinite because it breaks the totality of the Same that exists in thought and being. The face of the other is an irreducible transcendence by nature of its absolute difference. But, according to Derrida, the radicality of alterity here renders the ethical relation indifferent, or worse violent. The other is certainly a transcendent other that disrupts the economy of sameness, but for Levinas the transcendence is asymmetrical. With reference to Husserl, whom Derrida is defending in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” Caputo writes, “the transcendence of the other person [is] different *from* me” but “not different *than* me,” it is “a field of novelty and surprise within a pre-given horizon of expectation.”<sup>504</sup> If we are not at least minimally in relation to that which transcends, then there is no relation at all, only indifference or violence. Derrida therefore detects that Levinas has reinstated an ethical hierarchy based on a positive metaphysical infinity, which is precisely what Levinas had desired to circumvent by availing himself of language. What this

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<sup>502</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, pg. 26.

<sup>503</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 20-26. See Derrida’s famous “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, [1967] 2002).

<sup>504</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 22.



means is that the pure and absolute Otherness Levinas desires is strictly impossible, *simpliciter*, an idealized ethics that imagines pure peace. This ‘impossibility’ is literally ‘non-sense,’ because it is not prepared for an experience *relative to* our horizon of expectation.

Levinas’ thought here is thus in the same league as negative theology. When he speaks of the Other, he means a ‘wholly,’ positively infinite Other in the singular. This is why Derrida repeats the syntagma, ‘every other is wholly other,’<sup>505</sup> in order to signal that the generalized movement from Levinasian ethics to a particularized responsibility is fraught with conflict and tension. This does not mean that negative theology has nothing to say. Indeed, there is something affirmative in negative theology’s desire to efface the name of God that is generalizable; “A passion for the impossible is a matter of general concern.”<sup>506</sup> In turning to Derrida’s later writings on this theme,<sup>507</sup> Caputo is interested in how the solicitation of the promise to speak – what goes under the name of ‘God’ in negative theology – is structurally analogous to deconstruction. That is to pose the question of ‘translatability’ by asking what would remain if “divested of its hyperessential voice, negative theology is driven naked into the desert?”<sup>508</sup>

## II. Translatability

One way to see how this translation happens is through the Platonic paradigm of *khôra*, which receives extensive investigation in *On The Name* (1993).<sup>509</sup> As we have seen, classic negative discourse in the Neoplatonic tradition holds out for a ‘good beyond being’ or an ‘otherwise than being,’ a “logic of the *hyper*” where the “Good nonetheless maintains at least an analogical community and continuity with Being and knowledge.”<sup>510</sup> Derrida finds another way of reading this paradigm by re-reading Platonic cosmology. The usual understanding that Plato ascribed to *khôra* in the *Timaeus* according to Derrida, is that it is neither ‘form (*idea*) nor sensible thing’ but is as old as the forms. It is the place where the demiurge ‘impresses or

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<sup>505</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-212.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., pg. 28.

<sup>507</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” pp. 143-195; Derrida, “Sauf le Nom,” pp. 35-87.

<sup>508</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 29.

<sup>509</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “Khôra” in *On The Name* (1995), pp. 89-127.

<sup>510</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 35. Caputo includes, as alluded to, Jean-Luc Marion into this group of ‘negative theologians.’ See Jean-Luc Marion’s, *God Without Being* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [1982] 1991). For an extended discussion on the relationship between Derrida and Marion see, John D. Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion” in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 185-222. This volume also contains a discussion between Derrida and Marion moderated by Richard Kearney. For an updated and in-depth study on the relationship between Derrida and Marion with specific reference to their different understandings of the gift, see Jason W. Alvis, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire: Debating the Generosity of Things* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

cuts images of the intelligible paradigms.’ But it is treated ‘analogically’ in platonic metaphysics when it is given a role inside philosophical discourse by receiving the metaphors of the ‘receptacle.’ For Derrida, *pace* the analogical treatment, *khôra* is outside of philosophical language; it is not a ‘good’ or an ‘evil’, neither is it a metaphor that relates to something, nor does it create or produce anything.

By letting take place (*avoir lieu*), she/it [*khôra*] gives without giving and so without producing debt, even as she/it receives without incurring debt. Of *khôra* we cannot say either that she/it “exists” or that “*es gibt*” *khôra*...*Khôra* is not even a third kind, because it is not a kind, a *genos*, at all but is radically singular, as if she/it were a singular individual with a proper name – “Who are you, *Khôra*?”<sup>511</sup>

In this way, *khôra* is like a “surname” for *différance* as Derrida called it,<sup>512</sup> an imitation that occurs in the founding moments of Greek philosophy. What is crucial for Derrida, according to Caputo, is that by setting up *khôra* in this way negative theology would thus be inscribed within *khôra* – “the ‘spacing’ or the ‘interval’ within which things find their place.”<sup>513</sup> Further still, Caputo characterizes the discourse on *khôra* as a ‘mirror-image’ effect of the Platonic ‘beyond-being’ of negative theology. Both discourses mirror each other, the one more below (*khôra*) and the other more beyond (God). There is, thus, a certain undecidability which emerges. It is not a matter of choosing between God or *khôra*. Rather, it is this site of structural undecidability (not indecision), where when deciding between the God of negative theology, haunted by *khôra*, that we simply cannot know and thus a more genuine “movement of faith is made.”<sup>514</sup>

Caputo and Derrida are not out to dispel the name of God, and what is left is not *khôra* as the experience of “misery, terror, loss and desolation.”<sup>515</sup> On the contrary, there remains something in negative theology, something generalizable, which needs to be saved by being translated. Just as the good beyond being, or the God without being needs to be haunted by *khôra*, so the name of God needs to be saved from itself. This is the task Derrida sets out in

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<sup>511</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 36.

<sup>512</sup> Derrida, *On the Name*, pg. 126.

<sup>513</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 39.

<sup>514</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 40.

<sup>515</sup> This is the protest of Richard Kearney, see “*Khôra* Or God?” in Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion For The Impossible*, pp. 107-122, pg. 113. See Caputo’s response which follows, “Abyssus Abyssum Invocat: A Response to Richard Kearney,” pp. 123-128, pg. 126.

*Sauf le Nom* (1993), one of his most explicit encounters with negative theology. Playing on the multiple translations of 'sauf' – which can mean 'to save,' 'to keep safe' and 'safe/except' – Caputo's analysis of Derrida's text seizes immediately upon a 'double-bind' in negative theology. Through negative theology's negations and attempts to cross out everything 'safe/except' the name of God, it sacrifices itself in order to 'save' the name. Negative theology, "dies in order to live (live on, *survie* hyper-live), lives without altogether avoiding dying."<sup>516</sup> The double-bind, Caputo says, is thus also a 'double-save', because in negative theology's sacrificial attempts to name what it cannot name, it ends up saving that name. Derrida, however, also notices in the 'kenotic' movements of this 'wounded language', "a writing that bears the stigmata of its own dereliction and failure,"<sup>517</sup> writes Steven Shakespeare. These Christian idioms are explicitly invoked because Derrida is pointing to an otherness that is contained and at the same time eludes Christian discourse. The name of God as the name of the 'wholly other' belongs and exceeds the Christian or any other 'determinable faith.' This marks the move of the translatability of negative theology. By folding apophatic theology back into the spacing of language, that is, by reminding it that if it were to attain full intuition of God all speaking would cease, deconstruction saves negative theology from itself. It keeps the name of God in play by inscribing it within the play, in order for it to join the play of other indeterminate names.

In the continuous turns in *Sauf le Nom* the dogmatic claims of negative theology (the fullness of intuited meaning) cannot hold, and yet dogma remains not finally separated from deconstruction as it takes on a new meaning as that which impassions negative theology to speak. At this point we can begin to see how the idea of translatability takes on general significance with regard to Christianity as the "hegemonic rule of a Christo-Euro-centric world."<sup>518</sup> The question is whether the movement of excess that Derrida has identified in negative theology is an example of deconstruction, or whether deconstruction is an example of negative theology? From which 'direction' does translation occur? The distinctions these questions imply, of course, are precisely what deconstruction sets out to disturb. For one can never be sure which one is an example of which in virtue of the impossibility of translation without remainder. For instance, in one direction, why can't we simply say that within the originary sovereign Christian religion we find examples of deconstruction (viz. the apophatic tradition)? That is, is Christianity not the 'founding' discourse within which deconstruction is

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<sup>516</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 43.

<sup>517</sup> Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, pg. 116.

<sup>518</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 55.

‘founded’? The problem here lies in precisely the movement of excess that deconstruction identifies *within* Christianity, namely, a God that cannot finally be named. A God who, according to the logic of the *sans*, is a God of a religion *without* a religion; a God who is wholly other and, therefore, also possibly any other. Conversely, in the other direction, perhaps we could ask: is not deconstruction the ‘founding’ discourse of which Christianity is but an example? Here the problem lies – recalling Heidegger’s attempt to extract the structures of experience from early Christianity – in the fact that the attempt to derive or repeat the elemental structures of Christianity, deconstruction would necessarily be shaped by that very discourse and, thus, in some way dependent on it.<sup>519</sup> The distinction between the two, therefore, is always destabilized as they remain irreducibly dependent on one another.

The objective of this chapter has been to indicate that under the il/logic of the *sans*, both ethics and religion are lead into a *via negativa*. This path leads to the deconstruction of the sovereign autonomy of the modern subject as well as the sovereign discourse of Christianity that protects a God that is even ‘beyond’ or ‘otherwise’ than being. Rightly understood, however, the il/logic of the *sans* does not terminate in cosmic nihilism or an atheistic khoral wasteland. Rather, as we have seen, the irreducible undecidability which acts as a governing il/logic, unsettles these distinctions while performing their mutual dependence on one another. The undecidability that such an apophatics produces is not meant to result in indecision or stasis, but in the possibility of endless translation, of keeping things open – ‘the possibility of the impossible.’ If the disposition to the openness of what is ‘coming’ is not felt with enough force in the language of the *negativa* or *ignorantia*, Caputo will argue that the ethico-political import and sense of hope in Derrida’s religion is better articulated with the notion of the messianic and the ‘more Jewish and biblical’ influences that proliferate Derrida’s later thought.

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<sup>519</sup> See Martin Heidegger, M. Fritsch and J. A. Gosetti-Ferencei (trans.) *The Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). The elements of this discussion, e.g. “founding” and “founded” discourses, are repeated in a number of different ways throughout Derrida’s writing, which Caputo forcefully exploits. We will revisit this again when we discuss the notion of the messianic. See John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 134-143.

# Chapter Five

## From Radical Religion to Radical Theology

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### I. Introduction

From around 1989 there appeared to be a shift to more political and religious themes in Derrida's thought which have often been compared to Heidegger's *Kehre* in the 1930's. However, from early-on the narrow sense of writing as a paradigm always touched upon religious themes, inter alia, the apophatic and *écriture*/scripture. Furthermore, insofar as Derrida continued to invoke the importance of 'the other' in his philosophy of difference via Levinas, his work was always in close proximity to irreducible religious motifs associated with Judaism. One can hardly, therefore, speak of a rigid turn but rather, as Clayton Crockett has remarked in a recent study, a change in 'motor scheme,' from one of writing to plasticity following the thought of Catharine Malabou.<sup>520</sup> While Crockett's investigation is chiefly concerned with the idea of the 'motor scheme' in terms of a biological materialist reading of Derrida, he is also concerned with other possibilities that Malabou's useful designation opens up. For him, what changes in Derrida is not so much a theme or perspective but rather a change of context and conditions that call for a more concrete engagement in the material realities of politics and religion.<sup>521</sup> "If there is a turn in Derrida's philosophy toward an explicit engagement with religion," Crockett says, "it can be traced to this essay,"<sup>522</sup> namely, the famous 1989 keynote address later published as "The Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority.'"<sup>523</sup> The latter was first presented at the Cordoza Law School at a point where deconstruction was being particularly targeted for political nihilism and irrationalism. Given not only other geopolitical events like the Rushdie Affair, the concomitant rise of fundamentalist Islam, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, but also the overconfidence of anti-Marxist jeremiads in the unrestrained celebrations of political and economic liberalism, it should perhaps not come as a surprise, then, that Derrida would begin to shift his vocabulary to accommodate the rising sense of urgency for which his philosophy

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<sup>520</sup> Catherine Malabou, Lisabeth During (trans.) *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialect* (London: Routledge, [1996] 2005).

<sup>521</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pp. 13-26.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid., pg. 15.

<sup>523</sup> The essay can be found in a volume published after the conference. See Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67.

needed to respond. 'The time was certainly out of joint,' he would say, quoting Hamlet in *Specters of Marx* (1993).<sup>524</sup>

As already noted, Caputo was one of the first to recognize not only that there was a 'positive' sense in which Derrida was reflecting on a certain religion, but also that deconstruction was itself in some way religious. Along with "Force of Law" and *Specters of Marx* where Derrida had begun to flirt with the notion of the 'messianic,' Caputo carefully unpacked many of Derrida's other texts and themes from the 1990's, including "Circumfession," "Faith and Knowledge," *Aporias*, *The Gift of Death* and *Archive Fever*. In his analysis of these writings in *Prayers and Tears* Caputo goes to great lengths to emphasize and isolate the themes which constitute the provocative suggestion that in Derrida's thinking one can discern a religion *without* religion, a desire for the wholly other that avoids the dangerous associations with religious dogma. What goes to the heart of deconstruction, Caputo claims, is a certain passion; a religious passion felt in Derrida's prayers and tears, a translatable and substitutable passion for God, and therefore equally a passion for justice. Sections two and three of this chapter, consequently, are dedicated to expounding three crucial religious motifs which animate and impassion a Derridian radical religion – the messianic, the apocalyptic and the gift.

While Derrida himself would always be suspicious of the word theology and its metaphysical connotations, Caputo dreams in *Prayers and Tears* of a theology *without* theology: "I have in mind a point at which theology, opening itself to translatability, opens the wound of its own kenosis and suffers from its passion for the impossible."<sup>525</sup> What happens after *Prayers and Tears*, therefore, is nothing less than the repetition of thought we saw in chapter three, the culmination of which takes places in *The Weakness of God* (2006) and *The Insistence of God* (2013). What started out as 'radical hermeneutics' has now been replaced/repeated by a 'radical theology.' This theology takes its cue from a God who names an event which exceeds nomination, a God who is neither 'safe' from atheism, nor able to be 'saved' with the assurances of faith. Faith in such a 'weak' God, however, does not mean the end of hope, justice or indeed, faith itself, but is rather the condition of possibility for 'real' hope, 'true' justice and 'authentic' faith. Caputo's radical theology and the God which it names occupy the remaining part of the present chapter (section four), viz. a radical theology where God does not exist but rather 'insists' in the coming event of justice and who reigns in an an-archic

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<sup>524</sup> Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf (trans.) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, [1993] 1994).

<sup>525</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 61.



kingdom without rules. This is a God without sovereignty which nonetheless lays claim to us unconditionally but without a strong force, indeed, a ‘weak force’ or a power of powerlessness.

## II. The Messianic

Deconstruction takes the form of a certain re-ligious re-sponsibility to what is coming, to what does not exist. Deconstruction turns on a certain pledging of itself to the future, on a certain *religio* that religiously observes its covenant with the *revenant* and *arrivant*, to what is coming back from the past, and to what is arriving from the past as the future. Deconstruction is, in that sense, a messianic religion within the limits of reason alone, that is, it is inhabited and structured in a messianic-religious way.<sup>526</sup>

Caputo suggests that the much-discussed figure of the ‘messianic’ is one of the clearest expressions of Derrida’s quasi-religion.<sup>527</sup> For him, it is an analogical paradigm of the Judeo-Christian notion of the coming Messiah – the one who is ‘to come’ bringing peace and justice. But this paradigm remains only analogous because there is a radical difference between the ‘determinate’ religions and the religion Caputo is pursuing. The determinate religions envision an actual arriving (*arrivant*) of the Messiah in the ‘here and now,’ whereas for Caputo and Derrida such an arrival forecloses the possibility of a ‘truer’ and more just arrival where the Messiah may or may not finally show up. In the latter, we recognize again the logic of the *sans*; a Messiah *without* Messiah, a ‘messianic structure’ of the Messiah’s coming that is denuded of its biblical forms. In the following section, it is shown that such ‘coming’ does not terminate in hopeless atheism, but rather, as Caputo contends, a more radically just and faithful/less faith. It is important for our purposes to register the centrality of this discussion; in particular, the relationship between the messianic and determinate messianisms. For, as we will see in the following chapter, much of the critical reception of Caputo’s religious reading of Derrida can be traced back to a misunderstanding of the messianic as that which moves ‘beyond’ the determinate messianisms. This is the tension between abstractionism and

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-150.

<sup>527</sup> For a volume dedicated to the political implications of this theme, see Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (eds.) *The Politics to Come: Power, Modernity and the Messianic* (London: Continuum, 2010).

particularism in deconstruction, a tension that Caputo will continue to navigate and clarify in his later theological writing.

The particular inflections of the figure of the messianic are captured in the quotation above. Firstly, in keeping with deconstruction's central object of critique — onto-theology and the concomitant 'metaphysics of presence' — the figure of the messianic represents a certain temporal orientation. Walter Benjamin, from whom Derrida drew much inspiration for his discussion of the messianic,<sup>528</sup> memorably concluded his *Theses on The Philosophy of History* (1942) by contrasting on the one hand the sense of the future for the 'soothsayers' as "homogenous, empty time," and on the other hand, the Jews for whom "[e]very second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."<sup>529</sup> The 'straight gate' in this reading is a pregnant and expectant orientation toward the future, and deconstruction is the site of preparation that prepares for this future by 'observ[ing] its covenant with the *revenant* and *arrivant*' (the Messiah). While it is true that the movement here reflects a Jewish and Christian "dialectic of memory and hope,"<sup>530</sup> it is also not fully the case because the Messiah himself cannot finally arrive. Were a determinable Jewish or Christian messianic arrival to occur, the potency or force in the expectation for the occurrence would not only be rendered impotent, but also, and as a consequence of the messianic Truth now in hand, would be unable to resist the short step toward virulent religious exclusivism. This is why the structural keeping open of the horizon of hope and expectation — which is the space that *différance* occupies — is to be understood as 'just.'<sup>531</sup> But to say that the Messiah 'cannot finally arrive' is not to say that he is not coming, "for it belongs" Caputo writes, "to the very structure of the messianic event that the Messiah is always coming, so that even if we meet him at the gates of Rome we will want to know when he is coming."<sup>532</sup> This orientation is not just shaped by its relation to a future, but also to a past, indeed, a memory or a ghost (*revenant*) that also disrupts the present. It is in the sense of Johann Baptist Metz's often quoted phrase, "the dangerous

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<sup>528</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, see chapter two.

<sup>529</sup> See Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn (trans.), Hannah Arendt (ed.) "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, [1955] 2007), pg. 264.

<sup>530</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Jayne Svenungsson, who has insightfully traced the messianic and other related themes in a rough genealogy of Jewish and Christian thought up to present day discussions in contemporary continental philosophy. See Jayne Svenungsson, Stephen Donovan (trans.) *Divining History: prophetism, messianism and the development of the spirit* (New York: Berghahn, [2014] 2016), pp. 6; 73-74; 168.

<sup>531</sup> See Derrida's critical comments on Heidegger's 'Anaximander Fragment' we encountered in chapter three. See also Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 27-34. Derrida inverts Heidegger's understanding of justice as the *Fug* or gathering of 'whiling' of presence. Caputo writes, "Derrida takes the *Fug* as *droit* and the *Un-fug* as justice. On Derrida's telling, it is only if (the) time is out of joint, if time is an un-gathering *Un-fug*, unhinged from the gathering unity of the living present, disjointed and opened up to the specter of what was not there, that justice is possible." See Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 123.

<sup>532</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 145.

memory of suffering,” that those generations who are not just ‘to come’ but ‘coming back from the past,’ continually disrupt the present.<sup>533</sup> Memories of those gone before can neither be fully forgotten, nor can mourning the loss which these memories engender free us fully from their ghosts. And yet, these dangerous memories lead neither to nostalgia or an escapist flight from the present, nor to stultifying guilt such that we are left paralyzed here and now. Rather, they make an urgent call on us to *respond*.

This raises, secondly, the question of messianic time as a ‘time that is out of joint’ and recalls the epigraph to *Specters of Marx* following Hamlet’s words to Horatio. In a “time [that] is out of joint,” Derrida reads Hamlet’s situation as one marked by the debilitating costs of autonomous self-reflexivity. In his essay “Time out of Joint,” Derrida suggests, referring to Hamlet, that “[k]nowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion; that is the doctrine of Hamlet.”<sup>534</sup> The tension felt in ‘Hamlet’s doctrine’ or the “gap between thought and action,”<sup>535</sup> is precisely the time of the messianic. But unlike Hamlet, who was rendered ontologically impotent by the ghost’s voice, the point behind Derrida’s ‘hauntology’ as he calls it, is precisely to let the voice of both the living and the dead speak to us and hold us accountable *for* action. There is, thus, a kind of ‘spirit,’ ghost or specter being invoked in Derrida’s *religio*; a spirit of Marxism “of a coming communist justice” that haunts, jolts and ‘dis-joints’ the present regime of linear time. It is like a certain rabbinic propheticism that reminds us much of the emancipatory vitalism of liberation theology, as seen in “the spirit of the Jewish prophets, Amos and Isaiah.”<sup>536</sup> This sense of disjointed time is contrasted to other specter(s) of dis-‘jointured’ time, the time of presence: Stalinism, the hegemony of the Free Market, the manipulation of the virtual, the Fukuyamist thesis of history’s end, and indeed, the fundamentalist Christian apocalypse of the Messiah’s immanent return to save the elect and condemn the wicked.

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<sup>533</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pp. 94-96. See Johann Baptist Metz, D. Smith (trans.) *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pg. 91.

<sup>534</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Time out of Joint,” in Anselm Haverkamp and H. R. Dodge *Deconstruction Is/In America: A New Sense of the Political* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995). This essay was first given as a keynote address at a conference in New York in 1993. Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster also repeat this claim in their book *The Hamlet Doctrine* (London: Verso, 2013), pg. 11. These last two references are drawn from an essay by Robert Vosloo who brings this reading of Derrida into conversation with the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in an attempt to interrogate the complexities of ethical action within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. See Robert Vosloo, “Time Out of Joint and Future-Orientated Memory: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Search for a Way to Deal Responsibly with the Ghosts of the Past” *Religions* 8. 42. (March, 2017), pp. 1-9.

<sup>535</sup> Vosloo, “Time Out of Joint and Future-Orientated Memory,” pg. 2.

<sup>536</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 122.

Thirdly, it is because of these ghosts, where “injustice runs rampant,”<sup>537</sup> that Derrida wants to offer a ‘messianic religion within the limits of reason’ — a religion without the determinable messianic content. With respect to the latter, it is important to note that while not yet explicit, Derrida’s thinking here is unmistakably engaging in a tradition of modern political thought — a tradition that secularizes messianic eschatology into a kind of philosophical chiasm, which is traceable through Joachimite Trinitarian arrangements, through to the Hegelian historicization of the Absolute and its concomitant revolutionary movements of the nineteenth century, and finally to Carl Schmitt’s political theology as we saw in chapter two.<sup>538</sup> Indeed, it is with respect to Carl Schmitt’s notion of sovereignty, in particular, that Clayton Crockett argues much of Derrida’s later work is in implicit dialogue.<sup>539</sup> The importance of this connection for our purposes has to do with the fact that insofar as Caputo is trying to develop a Derridian philosophy of religion, there is also a Derridian counter political theology implied within Caputo’s theological schema, even if he and Derrida resist the formulation ‘political theology’ itself (given its Schmittian connotations) and prefer the locution “democracy to come.” The next chapter will engage this schema and attempt a description of a ‘radical *political* theology.’ The impetus for this description, which is the goal of this study, is taken from Caputo’s theological reading of Derrida and in particular radical theology’s *theopoetics*, which is the constitutive resource for such a radical *political* theology.

In Derrida’s talk of a ‘messianic structure’ there appears to be a repetition of the Heideggerian-Bultmannian gesture of mining ‘primitive Christianity’ (*Urchristentum*) for its hermeneutical potential — is this ‘universalizable’ derived from the determinable singular messianisms, or are the determinate messianisms derived from this irreducible ‘universalizable’ messianic structure?<sup>540</sup> At first it would seem that it is not a matter of deciding between the two. Caputo frames it thus:

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., pg. 125.

<sup>538</sup> It is to be noted that this political genealogy of secular modernity belongs to a reception history which has not gone uncontested. We have already referred to the recent work of Jayne Svenungsson, *Divining History*, where she complicates the influence of key figures like Joachim of Fiore (pp. 35-63). Though she does engage extensively with the German Romantics (Novalis, Schleiermacher, Schelling) she still leaves much to be desired with respect to Hegel — one of the key architects of secular modernity. In this regard, Graham Ward has argued that despite the posthumously recruited reading of Hegel’s speculative philosophy that props up the State (Löwith, Adorno, Kojève, Fukuyama), Hegel’s political philosophy remains deeply theocratic and therefore ‘messianic,’ insofar as *Geist* is not reducible to finite forms of government but rather refers to the realization of Christ’s rule in a Kingdom that is always to come. See Graham Ward, “Hegel’s Messianic Reasoning and its Theological Politics” in Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (eds.), *The Politics to Come*, pp. 78-97.

<sup>539</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing*, chapter three.

<sup>540</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable” in John D. Caputo (ed.) *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 22-24.

the two possibilities are entirely compatible and complementary approaches that arise from alternately taking two different but compatible points of view...the messianic in general is the ontological ground or basis (the *ratio essendi*) of any historical messianism. But in order of learning or knowing, one would never have had the least idea or suspicion of the structure of the messianic without the help of these historical revelations, which are the *ratio cognoscendi* of the messianic.<sup>541</sup>

The difficulty, Caputo announces however, lies in the fact that these possibilities are treated as distinct 'entities' and thus mimic the entire problematic of the particular-universal/fact-essence/revelation-revealability binaries with which deconstruction tasks itself for interrogation. This distinction between the messianic and the concrete messianisms constitutes Caputo's one "criticism, if it is one, of Derrida."<sup>542</sup> To be precise, respecting the difference of the determinable messianisms, which would mean that we cannot live divorced from history, context and place, forecloses the possibility of talking about a universal under which these particularities would be subsumed. On the other hand, without the experiences, histories and revelations of these messianisms, we may not have been able to speak about the messianic at all. So, it seems we are back where we started, with the problem being that "we are at a loss to describe the *status* of this undeterminability, this indeterminable messianic, without specific content, which cannot be a true or conventional or garden variety universal."<sup>543</sup>

Caputo's discussion of this tension, which becomes his critical gloss of Derrida, is followed by a thought experiment carried out with respect to Heidegger's notion of the 'formal indication,' which is just another loose, and ultimately unsatisfying way of trying to provide a 'a certain pale formal structure' to the concrete messianisms, one that respects their idiosyncratic nature.<sup>544</sup> While the formal indication affirms the singular in all its singularity, it does not 'engage' the singular and, thus, remains empty and lifeless — we might say that it appears as a "khôral, an-khôral-ite and desertifying religion"<sup>545</sup> *without* the traces of its determinate occurrences. But, and this is the central and affirmative move of Caputo's entire reading of Derrida, the messianic as a general structure *cannot* extricate itself of the traces of determinate religion — there are always tracks that remain in the desert — specifically their prophetism

<sup>541</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 137.

<sup>542</sup> See John D. Caputo, "Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope" in James H. Olthuis (ed.) *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 120-149; pg. 130.

<sup>543</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 139.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid, pp. 139-143.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., pg. 148.

and concern for the other. Here the paradox of an impossible messianic faith devoid of content, but which nonetheless makes use of the content of faith, is *the* impossibility of deconstruction and to which the messianic bears witness with 'prayers and tears.' Caputo's reading of deconstruction is a quasi-phenomenological repetition of deconstruction as a religious *experience* which insists on the porosity between faith and unbelief. The "desert-like and arid, an-khôral, atheological messianic," Caputo says, "enjoys a great deal of the life of the historical messianisms...The *whole idea* of 'abstracting' from the concrete messiahs is to intensify the urgency of the messianic."<sup>546</sup> This is what the messianic *means* for Derrida, the im/possibility of an 'absolute-future' that we cannot finally count on, the infamous *quasi*-transcendental possibility of the messianic in general. It is, therefore, particularly peculiar that deconstruction would be charged with an allergy for the particular since Derrida is himself not without his messianism, as Caputo points out: "the Derridean messianic does have *certain* determinable features, some of which – e.g., its being turned to the *à-venir* – it has borrowed from the prophetic."<sup>547</sup>

Deconstruction for Caputo is structured like a religion insofar as the category of the religious – the messianic, God, justice, the 'to come', the impossible – is an *experience of response* to something that itself cannot be experienced in ordinary time but only as an absolute otherness. What a religion *without* or *sans* religion means for Caputo's Derrida is thus: "a religion without theology, a life of prayer and passion without theology's God...For Derrida, God is not an object but an *addressee*, not a matter for theological clarification but the other end of a prayer, given not to cognition but to passion, neither him nor her nor it, but 'you' (*tu*)."<sup>548</sup> In this way, Caputo positions Derrida as not willing to give-up on the name of God unless it has anything to do with orthodox Jewish or Christian theism, in which case he "rightly passes for an atheist" as he writes in *Circumfession*.<sup>549</sup> Rather, God names a deep calling that is also called upon (with prayer and tears) in the midst of life as a severance from the Truth. While Derrida avoids the word theology, Caputo himself, now equipped with this religious reading of Derrida and postmodernism, will venture into a 'radical theology' that he argues gets beyond the philosophy vs. theology debate to a more elemental faith and theology.<sup>550</sup>

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-142.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., pg. 142.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid., pg. 289.

<sup>549</sup> Derrida, *Circumfession* (1991) quoted in Ibid., pg. 288.

<sup>550</sup> For the way in which Caputo understands this contribution to philosophy and theology which goes beyond their separation in modernity, see the more popular work, John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006). See chapter one, fn. 58.



### III. The Gift of Apocalypse

The messianic motif that Caputo highlights in *Prayers and Tears* would be incomplete without also an account of ‘the apocalyptic’ and ‘the gift.’ Indeed, these themes straddle either side of his chapter on the messianic, respectively. Their importance for our analysis here is to further the claim that Caputo is not simply spinning the paradoxes of religious language in favor of a ‘back-door’ theology, but rather that there is something which this language names – a certain *experience* of the religious – that impels life toward justice and the other. Like the messianic, the apocalyptic and the gift share an essential dynamism which treats the second term of the *sans* neither as simple negation devolving into nihilism, nor in a mystical move that reaches ‘beyond’ in the manner of negative theology. Rather, as we will see, this paradoxicality – the ‘to come’ of the Messiah that never simply comes or the impossibility of the gift that is never simply given – is experienced as a rupture of sovereign thought and being, neither incapacitating nor paralyzing but urging and soliciting for its realization in the here and now.

#### I. Apocalypse without Apocalypse

As we saw above, the figure of the messianic has a temporal structure that is orientated toward a future (an absolute-interruptive future, yes, but also an interruption from ghosts of the past). This future has the status of a ‘to come,’ something coming like the Messiah. Caputo traces the *infinition* of the ‘to come’ – referred variously in French by the playful semantic constellations Derrida is known for (*venir, à venir, viens, invention, l’avenir* and *événement*) – in a number of Derrida’s texts.<sup>551</sup> Here we examine Caputo’s reading of the 1983 essay glossing Kant titled, “On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy.”<sup>552</sup>

Caputo indicates that Derrida – initially unaware of the allusion to John’s Apocalypse (the book of Revelation) with respect to the sense of the “Come!” he had been elaborating with respect to Maurice Blanchot – undertakes what he calls a ‘catastrophic reversal’ of the text. Derrida, like Kant, is no less distressed at the apocalyptic ‘mystagogues’ and the doomsday tails of cataclysmic destruction or triumph (whether Marxist, Fukuyamists and we may add,

<sup>551</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 67-112. Caputo draws upon Derrida’s *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (1980), *Parages* (1986), *Politiques de l’amitié* (1994) and *D’un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* (1983).

<sup>552</sup> See Jacques Derrida, John P. Leavey, Jr. (trans.) “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” in *Semeia* 23 (1982), pp. 63-97. The essay was first presented at the end of the 1980 Cerisy-la-Salle conference.

Trumpist). Unlike Kant, he is not prepared to draw a hard and fast distinction between the reasonableness of rational philosophy and apocalyptic thinking. For Derrida, the apocalyptic story John tells is riddled with confusion, “depicting a system of messages (*envois*) sent out over a complex apocalyptic postal system.”<sup>553</sup> The source of the message of the coming Messiah is ambivalent; does it come from God, Jesus, an angel? Indeed, no less confusing is locating the recipients of this message. Historical criticism, for example, leads one to ask which John? Or to which community is this letter being sent? What about the Q-source? Nonetheless, precisely in this ‘*destinerrance*’ of the apocalyptic text — where does it come from, and to whom is it being sent? — another sense, a reversal, of the text is released: “a text is apocalyptic just when the confusion and profusion run wild.”<sup>554</sup> But what does this mean?

Derrida’s point is not to shy away from reason, for he would affirm the need for reason in order to limit *any* apocalyptic claim to truth, but rather, to draw attention to another sense of the apocalyptic that moves both beyond the finality reason assumes, as well as the mystification of historical apocalypticisms. Deconstruction is an apocalyptic (religious) discourse, but its dynamic can be associated neither with reason nor with religious dogma. It is an apocalypse *without* apocalypse. Only by this second sense of the apocalyptic describing an unpredictable and ungraspable future, can the invitation and summons of the “Come!” occur. Saying ‘come’ to the ‘in-coming’ Messiah is the *happening* of the present. Without the structural unknowability of the future apocalypse (its time and place) there would be no reason and no possibility to say ‘come,’ because we would already know what was coming. It is *the* impossibility of the coming Messiah, the absolute-future as an event that punctures ‘ordinary’ presence, which itself makes possible the happening present. Paradoxically, then, the apocalypse is also a gift. A gift in the sense that without this apocalypse we would not have a *happening* present, a present that is not beset with idle ‘being-there’ but pregnant with expectation and desire.

## II. The Gift of Givenness

The dynamic of a ‘real’ experience that escapes realism but which is also not idealism is sharpened when considering the theme of the gift, that is, the claim that there remains an *experience* of the gift (the gift of the coming Messiah) despite the fact that the gift itself is never given, and which nonetheless remains of ethical import. This thinking of the gift which

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<sup>553</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 91.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 92.

belongs to Derrida and which Caputo takes as an indication of theological significance (viz. a gift without a determinable giver, God, for example), has had a controversial reception and sparked vigorous debate. In order to distinguish Caputo's thinking on the gift it will be useful to pick-up the discussion of this theme between deconstruction and phenomenology, emblematically represented by the tensions between Derrida and his former student, Jean-Luc Marion.<sup>555</sup>

Though it is certainly clear that the idea of 'gift' or 'givenness' is central to the thought of figures like Husserl (*Gegebenheit*) and Heidegger (*Es gibt*), it was not at all obvious that such a debate between phenomenology and deconstruction would have emerged had it not been for the empirical and practical 'gift-theory' developed by the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss.<sup>556</sup> Mauss's thesis was that the primordial level of human interactions was determined by an 'economy' of gift-giving which structured the social bonds of society and thus determined the bases for the condition of meaningful human relation.<sup>557</sup> This theory generated much debate in France, sparking responses from Claude Levi-Strauss<sup>558</sup> and Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>559</sup>

An important implication of the thinking in these figures was the relation between the gift, intent, and desire. As Jason Alvis explains, the notion of desire, which became prominent in the French academy from the 1930's to the 1990's, was a far more useful category to describe the human condition. This became the case in the context of the 'irrationalism' which defined

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<sup>555</sup> Caputo's full account of the nature of the gift where he unpacks Derrida's *Given Time* (1992) and *The Gift of Death* (1995), can be found in chapter four of *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 160-229. The discussion which follows will draw primarily on Caputo's critical commentary of the debate between Derrida and Marion that was staged at the first 'Religion and Postmodernism Conference' held at Villanova. See John D. Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 185-222. Marion's opening essay to this volume as well as the discussion with Derrida that follows can be found in the first two chapters respectively. Caputo has also outlined his reservations in other essays, see for example John D. Caputo, "The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy" in Kevin Hart (ed.) *Experiences: Jean-Luc Marion* (Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), pp. 67-94. There Caputo argues that Marion's work hyperbolizes Husserlian intuition (givenness), in contrast to Derrida who hyperbolizes Husserlian intention. The former compels one to a faith commitment where the latter leaves the option for faith open-ended. Caputo makes a similar argument when he distinguishes between his own 'devilish hermeneutics' and Marion's 'eucharistic hermeneutics' in *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press: 2000), pp. 201-207. See also Jason Alvis's study, which appears to be the most comprehensive recent intervention on this debate: Jason Alvis, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire: Debating the Generosity of Things* (Switzerland: Springer, 2016).

<sup>556</sup> Alvis, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire*, pg. 5.

<sup>557</sup> See Marcel Mauss, W.D. Halls (trans.) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, [1925] 1990).

<sup>558</sup> See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>559</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique. Précédé de trois études d'ethnologie Kabyle* (Genève, Paris: Droz, 1972). For a summary see, Jeremy F. Lane, *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), pp. 102-105.

the two Great Wars and the associated inadequacy of more ‘cognitivist’ and ‘consciousness-centred’ philosophical approaches. Figures like Georges Bataille found desire or ‘eroticism’ to be the defining term which marked existence, “because of its powers to subvert and transgress the mastery of the ‘I.’”<sup>560</sup> Alongside other contemporaries like Maurice Blanchot, who inaugurated a turn to language by distinguishing desire as being an ‘impossibility,’ and Jacques Lacan with the psychoanalytic relation between desire and the ‘lack’ which sustains it, these writers despite their differences all converged around a central point. Alves writes, “Lacan, Blanchot and Bataille all hold to a conception of desire that cannot be reified in an object, that always relates with the foreign and strange beyond the subject and its knowledge, and generally maintains an inherent relation with ‘the other.’”<sup>561</sup> There is a Platonic sense in the relation of desire to this foreign other (*eidos*), Alves notes, and it is in this reading that Derrida still senses, on the one hand, residues of Husserlian ‘intentionality’ and Heideggerian ‘givenness’ (*es gibt*) of originary being,<sup>562</sup> and on the other, an economics of gifting which annuls the gift by substituting it for principled obligation.<sup>563</sup>

In the debate between Marion and Derrida, then, Caputo shows that there are two key points, leading to a third, which drive a wedge between their positions. For Marion’s part, thinking the gift relates to the ‘givenness’ of phenomena in the Neo-Kantian tradition of Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>564</sup> His provocative move, however, was to invert the Husserlian schema by arguing that ‘ideal’ objects (i.e. God), in the Kantian sense, far from having no intuitive content at all (givenness) – that is, we cannot ‘intend’ *das Ding an sich* because, by definition, it is infinite and therefore cannot appear to finite consciousness – in fact, exceeds intentionality because of the *excessiveness* of intuitive content or givenness. Phenomenology can give a ‘scientific’ description of the ‘formal possibility’ of this excess, but only historical revelation can actually give it.<sup>565</sup> According to this first point – the ‘hypergivenness’ of the ideal object – Marion’s God escapes a ‘metaphysics of presence’ not because there is *no* intuitive content,

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<sup>560</sup> Alves, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire*, pg. 10.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

<sup>562</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 164-167.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-177.

<sup>564</sup> Marion has detailed his position in a number of works. Worth noting here are Jean-Luc Marion, Thomas A. Carlson (trans.) *God Without Being* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), Jean-Luc Marion, Jeffrey L. Kosky (trans.) *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and Jean-Luc Marion, Stephen E. Lewis (trans.) *Givenness and Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>565</sup> Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible,” pg. 194. It is on this point that Caputo himself charges Marion with ‘phenomenologizing theology.’ In trying to provide a phenomenological description for the possibility of revelation, Marion resorts to the language of theology and faith to bridge the gap between possibility and actuality. For Caputo, faith then becomes used as a hermeneutic tool, providing “an interpretative slant [...] that allows the believer to intend something that is precisely not given.” See Caputo, “The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology,” pg. 87.

but because there is *too much* content, that is, the phenomena is 'saturated' with *givenness* that any intention/concept/idea simply cannot contain it. While Derrida would find a point of agreement in Marion's attempt to subvert the transcendental conditions of modern subjectivity (which impose themselves on the external world of objects) he nonetheless would wonder if Marion has not taken Husserl too far.<sup>566</sup> This leads to the second point. If hypergivenness for Marion is not the same as 'presence,' insofar as the intuitive content exceeds the intention of a metaphysical concept, this does not mean for Derrida that it is any less 'hyperessential.' The latter, Caputo writes, "is the superabundant self-presenting of God, the deeper, saving operation of the God beyond God, without Being, otherwise than essence, higher being."<sup>567</sup> The nature of an essence which goes beyond (*hyper*) is always in the service of a *saving* operation. We lose God with being in order to save him without being – this was Derrida's protest against negative theology more generally. Where something is given up in order to gain something else one enters into an *economy*. This third point, the divine *economy* of the gift, appears as Derrida's chief concern with Marion's thinking and also the point at which their disagreement can be most clearly seen.

### III. The Gift without Givenness

For Derrida, the gift of givenness in Marion's description, becomes caught up in an economy of exchange, implying debts, rewards, expectations and indeed, very little faith. For Derrida, this cannot be the nature of a 'true' gift. In *Radical Hermeneutics* Caputo showed that in Derrida's rereading of Husserl, the 'grammatological reduction' means that 'monological interiority' is impossible without the use of signs. Signs are needed in order not only to communicate the meaning of transcendental histories (like the Pythagorean theorem),<sup>568</sup> but also for the interior articulation of transcendental consciousness itself.<sup>569</sup> However, given what we have already discussed in chapter four regarding the nature of *différance*, the use of signs to create stability in the flux of meaning has the consequence that meaning is only ever obtainable by the *repetition* of signs, not because they refer to an ultimate transcendental signified. It is because the ideal object is *not* given that the coming to presence of the present is made possible at all. To put this another way, the internal consciousness of the phenomenological subject according to deconstruction is only made possible through a perversity of the meaning of phenomenology, namely, by means of that which *does not* appear.

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<sup>566</sup> Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," pp. 192-194.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., pg. 195.

<sup>568</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 123-130.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-138.

In Derrida's words, "we recognize an irreducible nonpresence as having a constituting value, and with it a nonlife, a nonpresence or nonself-belonging of the living present, an irreducible non-primordially."<sup>570</sup>

For Marion, Derrida's accounting of the gift produces an aporetic and 'disturbing result.' Caputo summarizes Marion's complaint thus: "if the gift appears, it is absorbed into economy; if it does not appear, that closes down the phenomenality of donation."<sup>571</sup> Derrida would agree with the first point but from the second he departs and distinguishes his own. For Derrida, the gift is *never* given, for as soon as it appears it is absorbed into an economy and therefore annuls itself as 'gift.' Derrida counters Marion by saying that he has not then eliminated the gift, but in fact has kept it safe (*sauf*). For Derrida, this cannot be a 'phenomenology of the unapparent,' for that would make it no longer phenomenology, instead it is an 'experience of the impossibility' of the gift being given, which remains, nonetheless, an experience of the gift.

The 'tug of war' between deconstruction and phenomenology, as Caputo describes it, is not easily resolvable and it will not be our task to arbitrate its outcome. Marion's work is subtle, detailed and argued over many pages that require careful analysis. Our purpose here is that by distinguishing between Derrida and Marion we can bring into relief the move that Caputo adopts in his own religious reading of deconstruction. To bring this discussion to a close, then, we must make sense of what it means to have an 'experience of the impossibility' of the gift – of the gift *without* givenness. Caputo distinguishes between what he calls Catholic, Protestant and Jewish Gifts.<sup>572</sup> Marion's phenomenology operates in the space of the former, where Christ and the sacraments become the supreme examples of phenomena that are saturated with givenness. Derrida's gifts, on the other hand, are more Kantian and Protestant and not a little Jewish either. They are Protestant and Kantian because their non-appearing "is to be compared to Kant's 'thought' without a concept...which regulates and motivates the ego as it moves through conceptually determined and perceptually determined intuitions of ordinary experience."<sup>573</sup> The gift, though it cannot be 'known' conceptually, nonetheless comes to bear upon our experience insofar as we can still 'think' about it. The gift (i.e. God) in this Derridian sense, then, takes on the character of the object of faith, where 'faith' is not a passivity but an act of 'doing the truth' – *facere veritatem* to quote Augustine. "Like Kant"

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<sup>570</sup> Derrida, quoted in Ibid, pg. 131.

<sup>571</sup> Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," pg. 203.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., pp. 208-210.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., pg. 209.



Caputo says, “Derrida finds it necessary to deny knowledge (truth) in order to make room for faith and doing the truth (which corresponds in Kant to the primacy of ‘practical reason’) and this in order to *save* the gift.”<sup>574</sup>

We can now understand the Jewish analogy with greater clarity. The messianic — the *gift* of the Messiah — is structurally ‘to come’ and never appears (*givenness*). But in such an indeterminate and impossible future of the Messiah’s coming, we are nonetheless moved (by prayers and tears) to a ‘truer’ / authentic expectancy or preparation for this coming. This is the ‘experience of the impossibility’ of the gift/Messiah and it is also the ethico-political core of deconstruction that Caputo argues is fundamentally a *religious* experience. The messianic as the non-coming of the Messiah is purposefully rendered, therefore, as an *infinition* of the ‘to-come-ing’ of the Messiah. The former suggests that we are left despairingly without hope, while the latter, precisely because the Messiah’s non-coming is the condition of possibility for hope, invites a pregnant and vitality of the present which never grows passive, but rather activates “a hope, a sigh, a dream, for what is not yet and can never be given.”<sup>575</sup>

There is a consistent character to this impossible gift (Derrida calls the gift “another name of the impossible”<sup>576</sup>) that deserves further comment. As we have been alluding to, Caputo’s Derridian philosophy of religion is often charged with passivity or an all too Kantian treatment of the gift that never makes an appearance. This point is particularly important because it relates to the religious and political philosophy that will be attended to (though in a different idiom) in the sections below and in the next chapter. In the latter case, some, like Caputo’s long time interlocutor, Merold Westphal, have determined that the ethical and political aspects of Caputo’s thinking (and likewise Derrida) have arisen more as *ad hoc* positions informed by personal-biographical preferences rather than as intrinsic features of deconstruction itself.<sup>577</sup> One can partly defend Westphal in these comments, since they were made prior to Caputo’s publication of *Prayers and Tears*. However, as we have shown in chapter three and four of this study, it was precisely the ethical move toward the other in deconstruction (via Levinas) that first compelled Caputo to take his Derridian leave of Heidegger already in the early eighties. The debate between Caputo and Westphal is also one that has reached something of academic celebrity status, and just as with Marion, it will not

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid., pg. 219.

<sup>576</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 169.

<sup>577</sup> See James L. Marsh, John D. Caputo and Merold Westphal (eds.) *Modernity and its Discontents* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), pp. 119-161; pg. 125.

be our task to resolve it here. What is worth pointing out, however, is that their disagreement comes down to the nature of postmodern hermeneutics, where Westphal argues that the tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur is just as radical as Derrida, a position that Caputo no-doubt vehemently contests.<sup>578</sup>

Staying with the philosophical point, then, which addresses this perceived charge of passivity, Caputo asks “when one desires the gift” – this gift which is ungiven – “[d]oes one succumb to a ‘transcendental illusion’ in which a concept...loses its empirical traction and is allowed to spin freely on its own in the empty air of ideality?”<sup>579</sup> At first glance it seems that this cannot not be the case, for as soon as the gift enters the economics of empirical reality it annuls itself. However, this is not *merely* an illusion, it is a certain ‘quasi-transcendental illusion’ because, as Caputo says, “we do not make the mistake of thinking *the impossible is real*”<sup>580</sup> – viz. we are aware that this illusion is to an extent just that, an illusion! To be in the midst of the *aporia* of the gift is to be “on the one end, the risk of entertaining a transcendental illusion; on the other end, the risk of ‘entering the destructive circle.’”<sup>581</sup> ‘Entertaining’ and ‘entering’ are two operations, two risks, two ‘double injunctives:’ 1) to “know how the gift annuls itself,” but nonetheless, 2) to “commit yourself [*engage-toi*] even if commitment is the destruction of the

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<sup>578</sup> For a recent comment on this debate see Justin Sands, *Reasoning from Faith: Fundamental Theology in Merold Westphal's Philosophy of Religion* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), pp. 203-224. Sands concedes that philosophically, Westphal runs into the kinds of problems Caputo raises about a delayed onto-theology. However, he argues that when seen with a ‘theological’ and ‘eschatological’ lens, Westphal’s project is as radical as Caputo’s because he “has articulated a theology that holds sin and its noetic effects as a principle for understanding the human condition,” namely, a condition that is always fallen and thus a continued this-worldly process of self-transcendence. pg. 217. However, this privileging of Christian discourse is dependent on the truth of Christian revelation, which is for Caputo the very Gadamarian-type hermeneutics that conserves the fruits of the tradition without a sufficient passing through of the deconstructive critique. See Caputo’s response to Westphal in John D. Caputo, “Methodological Postmodernism: On Merold Westphal’s *Overcoming Onto-Theology*” in *Faith and Philosophy* 22.3 (July, 2005), pp. 284-296; pg. 293. See also Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 108-115. A part of this critique is what Caputo calls a ‘thin postmodernism,’ one in which Westphal is charged for being too Kantian in the sense of limiting knowledge to make room for faith. This critique extends from their disagreement with what is meant by ‘onto-theology’ and therefore, the character of continental philosophy’s activity of ‘overcoming.’ Westphal had laid his position out in *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), where he argued that the designation of ‘onto-theology’ is a critique “directed toward the *how* rather than the *what* of our God-talk,” pg. 23. He expanded this argument in *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004). For Caputo, Westphal’s account of ‘transcendence’ in the latter is not a ‘decentering’ of the self, but rather a ‘recentering’ of the self on God, and this replays the ‘central’ term in onto-theo-logic, which is the Center that a more ‘robust postmodernism’ wants to destabilize. See John D. Caputo, “What Is Merold Westphal’s Critique of Ontotheology Criticizing?” in Keith B. Putt (ed.) *Gazing Through a Prism Darkly: Reflections on Merold Westphal's Hermeneutical Epistemology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 100-115. For more of this continued debate see also Keith B. Putt, “Friends and Strangers/Poets and Rabbis: Negotiating a ‘Capuphalian’ Philosophy of Religion,” followed by Westphal and Caputo’s response in Clayton Crockett, Keith B. Putt and Jeffrey W. Robbins (eds.) *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), pp. 34-58. For a resource to these contemporary debates more generally, see Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

<sup>579</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 170.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., pg. 170.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

gift by the gift.”<sup>582</sup> The impossibility of the gift without givenness is not *simply* impossible, it impassions the circulation of the economy of gift exchange just at it risks shutting down the economy altogether. The tension here is not resigned complacency, but rather wildly productive gratuity which always, structurally, risks ingratitude.

At this point we can summarize the religious dimensions Caputo traces in *Prayers and Tears*: first, there is a ‘generalized apophatics’ which “repeat[s] the structure of faith in a faith without dogma;”<sup>583</sup> second, an apocalyptic dimension that underscores the structural demand of hospitality for the in-coming Other/Messiah who never comes; third, a carrying over of this temporal notion into the central religious motif – the messianic (or messianicity) reflecting a universal structure that *per* impossible cannot avoid repeating the prophetic impulse of the singular messianisms; fourth and finally, the nature of impossibility in Caputo’s analysis of Derrida’s ungiven gift, stressing the importance of an ultimately anti-phenomenological responsiveness to absence, which issues a circulation of affirmative and productive impulses.

#### IV. Derrida’s Religion

We have yet to attend to the final arguments of *Prayers and Tears*, where Caputo addresses the question of whether it is possible to read Derrida as a “Jewish” thinker and if deconstruction is therefore a ‘Jewish science.’ In a section on circumcision (the apotropaic emblem of separation of the Jew before a violent God, according to Derrida’s reading of Hegel)<sup>584</sup> Caputo illustrates Derrida’s concern for the ‘fact’ of the Jew in opposition to its violent ‘figuring’ in the history of philosophy (Hegel).<sup>585</sup> This leads to a frank discussion about the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. In its Hegelian form the Jew is incapable of the incarnation because he/she cannot “appreciate the sensuous embodiment of the infinite.”<sup>586</sup> Contrary to Hegel’s loving Christian family which is orientated toward the density of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), the Jewish family worships in an empty temple, “a signifier without a signified,” and is thus relegated to the margins for its participation in a religion of hollow legal codes which are unable to mediate truth.<sup>587</sup> Consequently, it is Derrida’s “prophetic passion and distrust of

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<sup>582</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, pg. 30, quoted in Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 171.

<sup>583</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 57.

<sup>584</sup> See Jacques Derrida, John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (trans.) *Glas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, [1974] 1986).

<sup>585</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 234-243.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 240.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*

incarnation” which orientates him to Jesus as ‘the Jew,’ not the incarnated omnipotent and sovereign God.<sup>588</sup> It is on this point about Jesus the Jew, as we will see below, that Caputo situates his Christology; a ‘poetics of an an-archival kingdom’ based not on a phenomenalization of the infinite in the classic understanding of Incarnation, but on an ‘iconic’ incarnation that reveals God as ‘weak’ in the height/depth of a *radical* kenotic action.<sup>589</sup>

Further pursuing Derrida’s readings of Paul Celan,<sup>590</sup> James Joyce<sup>591</sup> and Sigmund Freud,<sup>592</sup> Caputo concludes ultimately that one does not have a privileged position from which to judge whether or not deconstruction is a product of Derrida’s ‘Jewishness.’ If one were to conclude that the latter where *unequivocally* the case, viz. that deconstruction was the result of a ‘Jewish mind’ *without remainder*, as Yerushalmi wants to press Freud, then in virtue of the very characteristics of this Jewishness (openness to the future, messianicity etc.) that relate it to deconstruction, it would then cease to be Jewish. Rather, it would take the form of a terminable Judaism, boxing in this community as the unique guardians of an exclusively Jewish ‘archive.’ We are, therefore, returned to the same aporetic structure between messianism and messianicity (Jewishness and historical Judaism), and that it is the undecidability between them which constitutes “not a loss, but an impetus, such stuff as dreams and passions are made of.”<sup>593</sup>

When this question of Derrida’s Jewishness and the nature of deconstruction is put forward in the final chapter, “Confession,” the answer is that there is no final answer, not even an autobiographical one. Derrida could not conceive, on the one hand, of saying that he ‘is’ Jewish, or on the other hand, that he ‘is’ an atheist – as if he enjoyed complete self-possession, self-ownership or sovereignty over himself. Thus, when he nonetheless calls himself a man of

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., pg. 247. This distrust is born out of a concern for conflating what Heidegger called ‘vulgar’ time with messianic time. Caputo points this out with respect to Blanchot in chapter two when he writes “For Blanchot, the Christian dogma of the Incarnation turns on a confusion of messianic time and historical time, on a certain contraction of the lightness of messianic time to the grossness of the order of presence.” Pg. 80.

<sup>589</sup> This kenotic action is ‘radical’ because the vulnerability of God that is put on display is done so without reserve, that is, by not attempting to use this action ‘economically’ to exhibit a more fully divine strength. See John D. Caputo, “The Sense of God: A Theology of the Event with Special Reference to Christianity” in Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (eds.) *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 27-42; pg. 39. See also chapter two of *Weakness of God* (2006), which we turn to more closely below.

<sup>590</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” in Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (eds.), *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 1-64. Originally published Jacques Derrida, *Shibboleth: Pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

<sup>591</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce” in Derek Atridge (ed.) *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 253-309.

<sup>592</sup> Jacques Derrida, Eric Prenowitz (trans.) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). Originally published as *Mal d'Archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).

<sup>593</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 277.

prayer and passion, a 'religious' man, he thereby situates himself in the cut (circumcision): "the scission between his Judaism and his non-Judaism, the partition dividing these two worlds."<sup>594</sup> Caputo emphasizes again that this is not a site of resigned 'choosing not to choose,' but instead that it invokes blood, tears, and passion, in virtue of the fact that Derrida is 'cut off' from the truth of his religious *alliance*. As for God, the name of God for Derrida names an absolute secret. It names a structural unknowability, *the impossible*; a name toward which he prays but without the security of knowing either its recipient or its final reception. Thus, Derrida can repeat Augustine's confession often quoted in Caputo's texts, "what do I love when I love my God?"

It should be added, that in this final chapter, the irony would certainly be missed if one were to balk at Derrida's self-indulgence, which Caputo communicates in a tone that borders on the hagiographical. For example, when he writes that Derrida's "*destiny* is to keep the cut open,"<sup>595</sup> or when he speaks of Derrida's 'resurrection' and his 'salvation through blood' that comes not through the mark of circumcision which separates him, but from destitution, "the blood that flows from being severed from the truth."<sup>596</sup> The irony Caputo employs by portraying Derrida as the messianic figure (a savior, or the one being saved) is found precisely in the fact that the resurrection or renewal is repeated completely anew; viz. the ironic outcome that "the resurrection that comes of this cut [Derrida's circumcision] is to deliver us from the hands of the One and Only Jealous God of Truth who not only spills the blood of those who defy his wishes but who also spills the blood of the faithful to remind them of their covenant."<sup>597</sup>

In these excursions through Derrida's religion, what becomes abundantly clear is that one can no longer talk about the Christian or Jewish God in the same way. Indeed, these traditions and the God of these traditions, have been *radically* deconstructed and re-posed. Faith has taken on a different meaning:

Faith is a passion for something to come, for something I know not what, with an unknowing, non-savoir, sans-savoir, which is such that I cannot say what is a translation of what. I cannot say whether God is a translation of "justice," so that whenever I pray and weep over justice I am praying

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<sup>594</sup> Ibid., pg. 283.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid., pg. 306. Emphasis added.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., pg. 307.

and weeping over God, dreaming and desiring God, with a deep, with a deep abiding passion for God, by loving God, by the desire for God, by “my God,” is a way of dreaming of justice.”<sup>598</sup>

Thematically, God, justice and the impossible, will continue to dominate Caputo’s thought in the subsequent decades following *Prayers and Tears*. Indeed, in what we might call a final repetition (perhaps there will be more?), Caputo takes Derrida where the latter himself will not go; from a ‘circumfessional’ description of God given in *religious experience*, to a ‘theopoetics’ of the event ‘harbored’ in the name of God which is given in a *theological analysis*.<sup>599</sup> Theology for Derrida still contains the *theo-logic* of the One — a totality of divinity that functions as a closed system of thought and being. With his accustomed sarcasm, Caputo remarks, “On this point [about theology], if I may dare to say so, Derrida is somewhat closer to the Bible-thumpers than the endowed chairs of religious studies.”<sup>600</sup> Caputo’s move is to take this reading of Derrida, especially from the writings of the 90’s that seem to shift the idiom of language to religion and politics, and to complete a further shift into theology proper. It is in this shift where we can see a deconstructed theology emerge and the sovereign God of omni-power (*potentia*), force (*kratos*), and sempiternality reconfigured as ‘weak’ and vulnerable, and thus opening a space for experimenting with a new theo-political-poetic conception sovereignty.

## IV. Radical Theology

“Between his *Prayers and Tears* (1997) and *The Weakness of God* (2006), Caputo undergoes a conversion of sorts, or what he describes as a coming out as a theologian.”<sup>601</sup> As mentioned, Caputo’s concern with more explicit questions regarding faith and theology can be seen in the series of ‘edifying divertissements’ in *Prayers and Tears*. In an interview with Keith Putt found in a volume of essays that mediated on the latter, we learn from Caputo that initially he had set out to write a book that would “put deconstruction in service of religion,” titled *God and Anonymity*. The latter was put on hold when the chapters on Derrida and religion took on a life of their own to later become the manuscript for *Prayers and Tears*.<sup>602</sup> The reflections on the

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<sup>598</sup> Ibid., pg. 338.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid., pg. 288-289.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid., pg. 289.

<sup>601</sup> See Crockett et al. (eds.), *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, pg. 5.

<sup>602</sup> See James H. Olthuis (ed.) *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), pg. 157. See also Caputo’s interview with Mark Dooley, which traces this transition to theology; Ian Leask



theological topoi found in the divertissements or “so many little sermons,”<sup>603</sup> as he called them, seem to be the product of those early deliberations that culminate in *The Weakness of God*<sup>604</sup> and later *The Insistence of God* (2013).<sup>605</sup>

At this juncture and given the trajectory mapped in the course of this study, we are in a position to formally engage its ‘second axis.’ Such a ‘formal’ engagement, however, is somewhat artificial since we have already been implicitly exploring the event throughout Caputo’s work insofar as it remains deeply influenced by Derrida. Indeed, the thinking of ‘event’ appears early Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context,” followed by his books dedicated to Francis Ponge, Paul Celan and Maurice Blanchot, as well as his later more political writings.<sup>606</sup> While Caputo follows Derrida<sup>607</sup> (with the exception of also Lyotard and Deleuze),<sup>608</sup> it should also be noted that there exists a long tradition of twentieth century continental thought that can be characterized as ‘philosophies of event,’ — stemming at least from Heidegger through Deleuze, Lyotard, Levinas, Blanchot, Badiou, Žižek and others. For Caputo’s part, as will be shown below, the series of dyadic tropes marshalled from Derrida’s

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(ed.), “From Radical Hermeneutics to the Weakness of God: John D. Caputo in Dialogue with Mark Dooley” in *Philosophy Today* 51.2 (2007), pp. 216-226.

<sup>603</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. xxix.

<sup>604</sup> Many of the themes in those sermon-like interludes in *Prayers and Tears*, Caputo would expand upon and publish in the years preceding *Weakness of God*. Indeed, almost two-thirds of the chapters in *Weakness of God* are acknowledged as having antecedents in previously published articles throughout the late 90’s and early 2000s. During these interceding years, he would also publish two popular works that serve as evidence of this increasing interest in theology. See John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001) and *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006). We mention these biographical points only to point out that at the beginning, Caputo never saw himself as doing ‘theology’ and that indeed it was a term he was ‘allergic’ to. Consequently, this lengthy ‘coming-out’ process to what he now calls ‘radical theology’ attests to a deeply rooted ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ and which no-doubt informs what he means by ‘radical theology.’

<sup>605</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013). Caputo has also produced a number of popular books that emphasize his theological position in more undemanding language: see John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); John D. Caputo, *Truth* (Penguin: 2014); John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2016).

<sup>606</sup> See Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) “Signature, Event, Context” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984 [1972]), Richard Rand (trans.) *Signéponge-Signsponge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (eds.), *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) and Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event” in *Critical Inquiry* 33.2. (Winter 2007), pp. 441-461.

<sup>607</sup> This is seen most clearly in his analysis of Derrida’s 1980 essay *Psyché: Invention de l’autre*. See Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 71-76.

<sup>608</sup> Acknowledging the influence of Gilles Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* (1969) Caputo writes: “In an important ‘sense,’ *The Weakness of God* is inspired by Deleuze, and this *Theology of the Event* in my subtitle is very much a contribution to a ‘(theo)logic of sense.’” See Gilles Deleuze, Mark Lester (trans.), Constantin V. Boundas (ed.) *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1969] 1990), and see Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 301; fn. 5. In Caputo’s earlier discussion of his theory of subjectivity in *Against Ethics*, he gives an account of ‘events’ (pp. 93-98), and distinguishes them by their singularity, idiosyncratic and irreducible nature. “The subject is never an ‘agent’ through and through. For one thing, the subject is just as often something acted upon, subjected to events.” Pg. 95. There, Caputo also footnotes (pg. 270, fn. 1) his indebtedness to thinking the singular and irruptive force of events to Deleuze as well as Lyotard, especially the latter’s last chapter of *The Differend*.

writings are ‘organized’ and recast by his own theory of ‘Name’ and ‘event,’ and subsequently deployed in a poetic discourse that constitutes ‘weak’ or ‘radical’ theology.<sup>609</sup> The artificial formality of the second axis, then, lies in the specific iteration of the event that takes place in this radical theological discourse.

Caputo’s critical and novel move is to develop his notion of ‘event’ in a theological account of deconstruction (or a deconstructive account of theology).<sup>610</sup> For him the event functions analogously to the different sites or dyadic tropes of the il/logic of *différance* (the impossible, the ‘to come,’ gift, messianic, apocalyptic). It names an excess relative to contingent horizons of meaning. Religion and theology are but historical constructs (names) which bear witness to a disturbance that exceeds them. This disturbance is the event which is experienced as a *call* in the ‘name’ of God. A ‘weak’ or ‘radical theology’ is configured as a specific description, hermeneutics, narration, or poetics, that responds to the experience of the call of this event – where much depends upon the ‘how’ of the response.<sup>611</sup> For example, as Caputo writes, “any theology, weak or strong, is the explication of the event that is implicit in the name of God.”<sup>612</sup> Accordingly, the appropriate response for a ‘theology *without* theology’<sup>613</sup> is to approach the event with a hermeneutic of ‘weakness.’ This means understanding that the call of the event ‘harbored’ in the name is indifferent to whether or not the ‘caller’ can be identified. Such is the mistake of ‘strong’ theology. The excess of the ‘event’ or the event of excess does not come from the ‘outside,’ from another ontological or ontic ‘source,’ or as Caputo later puts it; God is not what ‘exists’ but rather ‘insists.’<sup>614</sup> The event ‘in’ the name of God (God’s insistence) is located on the ‘plane of immanence’ (Deleuze), which describes not an ‘infinite finitude’ but rather a ‘finite infinity.’ That is, the possibility of *infinition* in what is actually happening.<sup>615</sup>

<sup>609</sup> Caputo’s use of ‘weakness’ is informed by Gianni Vattimo’s ‘Weak thought,’ see John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, Jeffrey W. Robbins (ed.) *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). It also follows Derrida’s use of the phrase ‘weak force,’ after Walter Benjamin’s ‘weak messianic force’ in the famed *Rogues* essay. See Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.) *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. xiv, 36.

<sup>610</sup> It is at this point that we may speak of a ‘postmodern theology’ according to Caputo: “On my accounting, things take a *theological turn* in postmodernism when what we mean by the event shifts to God. Or, alternately, things take a *postmodern turn* in theology when the meditation upon *theos* or *theios*, God or the divine, is shifted to events.” See Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event” in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, Jeffrey W. Robbins (ed.) *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 47-88; pg. 49.

<sup>611</sup> “The old ‘logos’ of theology is replaced with ‘events,’ which are addressed by a poetics, not a logic. To put it in Paul Ricoeur’s terms, it is not a *logos* but an event that the *mythos* gives us to think.” See Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>612</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), pg. 113.

<sup>613</sup> Caputo borrows this phrase from Charles E. Winquist’s *Surface of the Deep* (Aurora, Colo: Davies Publishing Group, 2003), pg. 206.

<sup>614</sup> Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pg. 14-19.

<sup>615</sup> “The *à venir* is a structure of experience and responsibility. It is not time but something going on in time. It is not a bad infinity but a finitely constituted but open-ended call – and in that sense not an infinite finitude but rather

The conclusion of this chapter will be dedicated to further exposing what Caputo means by his ‘theology of the event,’ as well as pointing toward the ramifications of this thinking about God for theology and sovereignty.

### I. The Quasi-Structure of ‘Name-Event’

The point of departure for Caputo’s radical theology begins with a distinction between two necessarily related terms that follow the parlance of deconstruction; ‘name’ and ‘event.’<sup>616</sup> As already discussed in chapter three, Derridian deconstruction begins from the critique of logocentrism, which, through the spatialization of the inside/outside binary, extends to all closed systems that attempt to exclude the outside as other. When Derrida says ‘*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*,’<sup>617</sup> he means not to eliminate the binarity of the inside/outside but rather to suggest that this opposition is already inscribed in the writing outside at the margins, and thus is subverted from the beginning. The fault of logocentrism and the ‘metaphysics of presence’ is to assume that binary distinctions remain fixed in their distinctiveness, whereas what Derrida shows is that binaries are always mutually constituting and their distinctiveness always unstable. The Name-Event structure follows this schema. While Caputo sees his theology of the event as an emphasis on the ‘event side’ of the binary (the outside, absence, impossibility, *sans*, without),<sup>618</sup> for which he has received no small criticism,<sup>619</sup> his intention is not to

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a *finite infinite*.” See John D. Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011), pp. 32-124; pg. 58.

<sup>616</sup> There are a number of superb introductions to Caputo’s theology of the event. From Caputo himself, see “Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event” in John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, Jeffrey W. Robbins (ed.) *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 47-88, also Robbins’ useful introduction to this volume, pp. 1-26; “The Sense of God: A Theology of the Event with Special Reference to Christianity” in Lieven Boeve and Christophe Brabant (eds.) *Between Philosophy and Theology: Contemporary Interpretations of Christianity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 27-41. For other introductions, which are generally optimistic toward Caputo’s project, see Katherine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 61-76, and Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 196-200. For a more critical approach see Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 7-22. After introducing Caputo’s thought in the opening chapter, Simpson embarks in each subsequent chapter to explicate and then defend the work of William Desmond as an alternative to Caputo.

<sup>617</sup> Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.), *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, [1967] 1997), pg.158.

<sup>618</sup> For example, with respect to democracy (Name), Caputo says “In the ‘democracy to come,’ the ‘to come’ [Event] is more important than the ‘democracy.’” See *Weakness of God*, pg. 3.

<sup>619</sup> This criticism can be designated as the problem of the ‘with’ in Caputo’s ‘religion without religion,’ that is, whether or not a religion without religion does not seem to favor the ‘event’ of religion over its historical instantiations. For recent critics like Joeri Schrijvers — *Between Faith and Belief: Toward a contemporary phenomenology of religious life* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016) — Caputo’s effort to avoid a certain empiricism leads to a neglect of factual being-in-the-world (pg. 162). This issue has also been raised variously in another volume of essays, see Aaron Simmons and Stephan Minister (eds.) *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion With Religion* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2012). It also goes to the heart of the titanic debate between Caputo and Martin Hägglund. Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) argued against Caputo by asserting that he creates too great a gap between the conditional

denigrate the 'name' but to expose it to the event which it contains or cannot see coming. Certain names concerning theology, indeed, theology itself – which presume to grasp the Truth 'inside' or at least to have obtained privileged access to it – are inevitably subjected to a 'quasi-hermeneutical' reduction of being (Name, God, theology) to the event going on 'in' or coming over being.<sup>620</sup>

Caputo wastes no time in the opening pages of *Weakness of God* to set out the itinerary of this reduction. He argues that names as nominal unities having accumulated meaning are always already compromised by an indefatigable paradox, in that they simultaneously contain events which are in principle uncontainable. The 'uncontainability' of events means that names like 'God,' 'Christianity,' or 'democracy' are opened up onto something that exceeds them, and which forces them to re-nominate themselves in an endless "nameability by other names equally eventful."<sup>621</sup> Since events ceaselessly escape nomination, names are endlessly caught up in 'translating' the event to which they are a response and, thus, are themselves not 'literal' in the sense of grasping (*greifen*) a concept (*Begriff*). Caputo calls the process of 'deliteralization' of the name which tries to articulate the event it harbors 'poetics.' This will be an immensely important part of his radical theology which we will pursue further below. Keeping in mind Derrida's critique of Levinas in "Writings and Difference" (1967), Caputo also notes that the excess of events is posited against a horizon of expectation or pre-given horizon of perception (Husserl) that it shocks and shatters. Opposing Levinas' *tout autre*, which is impossible, *simpliciter*, Caputo follows Derrida in arguing that events refer to *the*

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and unconditional, which allows him [Caputo] to circumscribe the inescapable 'infinite finitude' of the present – Derrida's 'radical atheism' according to Hägglund. Accordingly, Caputo can insist on the 'passage' through the conditional to the unconditional, thus leaving 'the with' of a religion without religion behind. One could perhaps make this argument for the present work, *Weakness of God*, where indeed there seems to be an emphasis on 'the Event' in spite of 'the Name.' But Hägglund's reading of *Prayers and Tears* (the object of his critique) misses the mark. Derrida's repeated religious references indicate surely something more than the mere notion of 'radical survival' as Hägglund argues. Caputo has written an almost 100-page response to Hägglund's characterization of deconstruction, see John D. Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion: From Radical Atheism to Radical Theology" in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011), pp. 32-124, to which Hägglund replied, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John D. Caputo," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (Spring, 2011), pp. 126-150. The debate has been recently revisited by Neal DeRoo in a three-part essay series in the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* online supplement, see Neal DeRoo, "The Dangers of Dealing With Derrida – Revisiting the Caputo-Hägglund Debate On The 'Religious' Reading of Deconstruction, Part 1." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*. <http://jcrt.org/religioustheory/2018/06/26/the-dangers-of-dealing-with-derrida-revisiting-the-caputo-haggglund-debate-on-the-religious-reading-of-deconstruction-part-1-neal-deroo/> (accessed June 28, 2018). See also Clayton Crockett's critique and defense of Caputo in Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing*, pp. 33-36.

<sup>620</sup> Only 'quasi-hermeneutical' because hermeneutics wants to retrieve the more originary relation between Being and 'man' that has been alienated by modern *Techniks* (Heidegger), or that wants to communicate the essential Truth of the tradition however contingently it may be expressed (Gadamer). See chapter four of *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 95-119.

<sup>621</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 3.

impossible, making them surprising because their incoming is *relative* to what we were expecting.<sup>622</sup>

The event has both a surprising and irruptive quality. The emphasis on irruption is to acknowledge the sense of the event given by Deleuze. However, Caputo stresses that he does want to stage a battle between Deleuze and Derrida but wants ‘to run together the two senses’ of the event. On the Deleuzian side, the event irrupts and breaks-out (*e-venire*) as a virtuality within names. On the Derridian side, events are what we cannot see coming, interrupting the horizon of the name and break-in (*in-venire*) with surprise.<sup>623</sup> However, whether irruptive or interruptive, events harbor an irreducible unforeseeability and therefore one could not say that what is breaking-out or breaking-in will be something ‘good.’ The event has no *telos* and does not involve an ‘essential’ unfolding but is rather constrained by the limitations of historical circumstance i.e. language itself or the name itself. This refers back to how Derrida understands the very structure of language as both promise and threat. The other of language is promised to us in language even before the intentional speech act. Thus, in the unavoidability of speech the other that language promises us takes on a ‘messianic look’ which keeps the future open. But if language, Caputo tells us, “is a promise to speak to one another of the things themselves, to give one another meaning and truth, that is a promise that cannot be kept.”<sup>624</sup> The structure of language, therefore, is both promise and threat and the event which is this promise is never a guarantee. On this account, we begin to see the religious ‘form’ of the event, in that the promise is also experienced as a kind of covenant, a covenant “that has been cut with us, which makes us the people of the promise, of the covenant, of the cut.”<sup>625</sup>

Caputo maps this ‘Name-Event’ structure onto the dynamics of Christianity. He asserts that internal to Christianity is a ‘bipolarity’ which is “a function of the distinction between name and event.”<sup>626</sup> However, where the account of ‘weak theology’ differs is that unlike classical theology which is always “vacillating wildly between the heights of power and depths of weakness” – as in the kenotic movement that ultimately is an exhibition of divine strength – Caputo’s aim is to allow the event to be thought all the way down. This is the possibility of

<sup>622</sup> On Caputo’s reading of Derrida’s relationship to Levinas see, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 20-24.

<sup>623</sup> Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pp. 49-50. There are limits to this Derridian-Deleuzian partnership, however. Caputo writes, “the collaboration collapses at that point when the event is nothing more than the actualization of a potency, a part of its program. The crucial point is that the ‘virtuality’ here means a purely open-ended promise but not a programmable predictable process of potentiality passing into actuality.” See pg. 271, fn. 14.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., pg. 30.

<sup>625</sup> Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” pg. 52.

<sup>626</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 8.



God, the “master word *par excellence*,” as the experience no longer of an *esse subsistens*, ontological or ontic being, indeed, untied from the order of being entirely, but rather as the possibility of the impossible event — God as a ‘vocative,’ ‘provactive,’ a ‘call’ or ‘weak force.’ Since the event remains unconditioned beyond the order of presence, its properties cannot *de facto* display any strength but only weakness through its infinity of invocations.

In *Weakness of God*, God, religion, and theology are ‘names’ inevitably corrupted by the gears of power and violence, relentlessly ‘preventing the event’ through the insistence of purity which their discourse claims. What these ‘names’ do not adequately take account of are the events they are trying to nominate, and because events are beyond nomination these ‘names’ can only ever be approximations. Let us consider in more detail the particularity of the Name-Event structure as it is mapped onto Christianity.

## II. The Death of God, Theology, and Justice

The discussion above demonstrates that Caputo’s distinctive move is to identify God with the event. Or rather, to be more precise (so as to maintain the ‘gap’ between the ‘Name-Event’)<sup>627</sup> it is the event that is getting itself *called* ‘in’ the name of God. Everything hereafter hangs on the grammatological reduction, where by virtue of *différance* the call cannot be identified with a caller.<sup>628</sup> It is the unconditionality and therefore undecidability of the event which allows this theology to be identified as ‘weak.’ Strong theology, conversely, cannot resist naming the caller of the call, which drowns out the event’s eventfulness.

By identifying God with the call of the event, Caputo is both aligning his position with the tradition of *death of God* theology,<sup>629</sup> as well as marking a clear and distinct break from it. Following the famous atheist critics of the nineteenth century — Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud — the metaphysical God is put to death. On this account, one can no longer believe in God when the gaps filled by religion are now occupied by the alternatives of science,

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<sup>627</sup> Caputo writes in *Weakness of God*: “everything turns on keeping the gap between name and the event open, on keeping the tension between them strong and alive, and thereby to be transported by that tension into the passion of life.” Pg. 298.

<sup>628</sup> See, Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 1-20.

<sup>629</sup> “Suppose we say there is at least this much to the death of God: that the God of metaphysical theology is a God well lost.” See, Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 23. Representatives of *death of God* theology to which Caputo would refer would include: Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), Harvey Cox’s, *The Secular City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) and John Robinson’s, *Honest To God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).



dialectical materialism, the will to power, or psychoanalysis.<sup>630</sup> If Christianity was crucified on its cross in the process of this Enlightenment secularism according to Nietzsche, then “a surprising thing [would] happen on the way to the death of God: Enlightenment secularism *also* got crucified on the same Cross, and that spelled the death of the death of God.”<sup>631</sup> The narratives of Ricoeur’s great ‘masters of suspicion’ were deemed themselves to be but another case of objectivist reductionism – a mirror image of Christianity’s grand story. “These reductionist critiques of religion,” Caputo says, “turn out to be, on Nietzsche’s own account, more varieties of what Nietzsche called the ‘ascetic ideal,’ a belief in a rigorous and unbending order of ‘Objective Truth.’”<sup>632</sup>

Despite the post-Nietzschean and Heideggerian wake of this development, Caputo still senses in the *death of God* theologies lingering assumptions of modern secularism. Thomas J.J. Altizer’s *Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966), for example, despite having drawn from both Nietzsche and Hegel, seems to have “rejected the central sense that the death of God had for Nietzsche, which is to announce the end or withering away of the ‘ascetic ideal.’”<sup>633</sup> What follows for Caputo is a classic Hegelian metaphysics of immanence based on the doctrine of *kenosis*: “In Altizer the death of God primarily meant that the absolute center had shifted its residence from transcendence to immanence.”<sup>634</sup> Here Nietzsche’s ‘God is Dead’ is not dead, but still very much alive. In this first instance, then, following Nietzsche and Heidegger as we have already seen in earlier chapters with respect to metaphysics, Caputo clearly adheres to a certain *death of God*.<sup>635</sup> However, attempts to kill off the old God of metaphysics that emerge after Nietzsche’s pronouncement in the vein of Altizer still fail because they subscribe to a version of modernity not incredulous enough toward *grand récits*.

If Caputo’s theology of the event is in some way an inheritor of this tradition and at the same time insists on invoking the name of God despite these failures, then we will need to be still more specific about the way in which he breaks from it, without thereby restoring God either

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<sup>630</sup> See, Caputo, *On Religion*, pg. 59.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., pg. 60.

<sup>633</sup> Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” pg. 68.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid. In Altizer’s own words, “we confront the paradox that a purely Hegelian thinking is at once a pure negation of the transcendence of God and yet an intended realization of what faith knows as the innermost life of God, a life which is death, for it is the ultimate sacrifice of an actual totality of love, and nevertheless that death or crucifixion is resurrection, and is the resurrection of a totality which is God and world or actuality at once.” Thomas J.J. Altizer, “Hegel and the Christian God,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 71-91; pg. 71.

<sup>635</sup> For Caputo, Jesus’ death, for example, signals the need to mediate on the event that takes place by trying “to think a certain death of God, the death of the *ens supremum et deus omnipotens*, the death of the God of power.” See Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” pg. 66.

in some kind of theurgic conjuration, or to a religious abstractionism that is materially insubstantial and politically paralyzed. To further distinguish Caputo's 'God' of the event one can begin negatively by briefly observing contemporary readings of Hegel in this *death of God* tradition. As alluded to above with Altizer, the issue with Hegel in these discussions involves the metaphoric representation (*Vorstellung*) of Christianity as the becoming of Absolute Spirit. The divergences of these readings more particularly, then, revolve around questions of Incarnation, Resurrection and therefore, Christology.<sup>636</sup>

In Hegel's philosophical system the world comes to be itself through the out-pouring of the Spirit in a process of self-abandonment and self-negation.<sup>637</sup> The world is the realization and manifestation of this self-realization of Spirit as it encounters itself as 'other.' This system is metaphorically represented in the Christian Religion where God is unknowable because he has negated himself in the Incarnation of the Son. The transcendent God through a first act of negation becomes immanent in the temporal domain of the world. Hegelian dialect requires that this negation itself undergo negation, a double-negation, in which the transcendent God through the *kenotic* action pours himself into the immanence of the Son, who is then crucified in the final act of self-abandonment. Resurrection, consequently, is interpreted as the realization of the Spirit in the endless dialectic of history's consummation that reconciles transcendence and immanence.

According to this adumbrated schema, Caputo's dissatisfaction with Altizer becomes clearer. The latter has insufficiently rendered the second part of the Hegelian dialect and in a certain sense, his Hegel is not Hegelian enough. The shift from transcendence to immanence, even if described in terms of language, time, and self-consciousness, still continues to celebrate God on a different ontological plane. The immanent God as the embodiment of the total presence of difference, which Altizer's atheist gospel proclaims, needs also to be put to death. Caputo assigns the honor of dismantling Altizer's Hegelian reading of Derrida to Mark C. Taylor. His landmark study, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1987),<sup>638</sup> which is said to have "pioneered bringing Derrida into Theology,"<sup>639</sup> penetrates and discharges the 'metaphysics of *kenosis*' found in Altizer through the disseminations of deconstruction. However, Taylor also

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<sup>636</sup> At this point we defer Caputo's own reading of Hegel (treated in the next chapter), as this represents another moment in his thought crucial to his development of theo-poetics.

<sup>637</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, A.V. Miller (trans.) *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and, Peter Hodgson (ed.) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Lectures of 1827*, one-volume edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>638</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).

<sup>639</sup> Marko Zlomislić and Neal DeRoo (eds.) *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010), pg. 1, fn.1

disappoints according to Caputo, by way of an application that remains inadequately attentive to the claims deconstruction makes on *us* – we are called to *respond* to the promise.<sup>640</sup> The *death of God* cannot mean we are without faith or responsibility. In short, Taylor's postmodern 'a/theology' which locates divinity in the immanently infinite connections, fluxes, and flows of never-ending networks, "hardly observes the '/' in his a/theology...but allows the *theos* to dissipate into thin air; it is atheology,<sup>641</sup> not a/theology, decisive death, not undecidability."<sup>642</sup> Following Steven Shakespeare's analysis, we can see that in these thinkers the undecidability of deconstruction has here been 'decided' in a "sacralization of purely immanent flows."<sup>643</sup> This immanent sacralization is attributable to a certain Hegelian use of the incarnational trope, suggesting a total emptying out of God into writing, which, despite upholding a sense of the 'newness' of God in language, nonetheless risks reducing the 'otherness' into an all-consuming totality.<sup>644</sup>

The nuances of Caputo's position with respect to *death of God* theology and specifically Hegel, can also be seen in his dialogue with Gianni Vattimo. Caputo has said that his notion of 'weakness' is a 'running together' of Vattimo's 'weak thought'<sup>645</sup> (*pensiero debole*), Derrida's 'weak force,' and St. Paul's 'weakness of God' from the epistle to the Corinthians.<sup>646</sup> On the point of weakness, both Caputo and Vattimo are in agreement that metaphysical objectivism and the dogmatism of confessional theology need to be tempered. For Vattimo, this begins by

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<sup>640</sup> Olthuis (ed.), *Religion with/out Religion*, pp. 158-159.

<sup>641</sup> Caputo essentially charges Martin Hägglund with this same 'atheology.' Following his critique of Hägglund who has, according to Caputo, fundamentally misunderstood Derrida's conception of auto-immunity – where religion, contra-Hägglund, would precisely be the contamination auto-immunity embraces – he asks rhetorically, "if religion is the attempt to keep oneself pure [Hägglund's position], is RA [Radical Atheism] not a radically atheistic 'religion,' which Derrida warns against under the name of the theologians of atheistic metaphysics?" See Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion," pg. 122.

<sup>642</sup> Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics," pg. 68. In Taylor's more recent work, *After God* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), where the Infinite occupies "the divine milieu in which everything is relative because all is related," (pg. 347) one can still sense an immanent dispersion which repeats the Hegelian dialect. Even after using Derrida's notion of *différance* to re-inforce the idea that nothing exists outside of 'adaptive networks,' (an attempt to resist the accusation that he [Taylor] is engaging in dialectical thinking) Taylor insists that deconstruction has nothing *constructive* to say. Pointing out the irony Caputo writes, "Taylor's real disagreement with Derrida is not that deconstruction has nothing constructive to say, which is a red herring, but that Derrida does not privilege dialectical difference and Taylor continues to do so, even after any such privilege has been undone by the very idea of a differential network." See John D. Caputo, "Review of *After God*, by Mark C. Taylor," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72. 1 (1 March 2009), pp. 162-165; pg. 164.

<sup>643</sup> Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology*, pg. 180.

<sup>644</sup> Echoes of this position are also to be found in the work of the British theologian, Don Cupitt. See Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire* (London: SCM, 1987).

<sup>645</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (trans.) *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), Gianni Vattimo, Luca D'Isanto (trans.) *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Gianni Vattimo, William McCuaig (trans.) *A Farewell to Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), Gianni Vattimo, Peter Carravetta (trans.) *Weak Thought* (New York: SUNY Press, 2012). For a valuable introduction to Vattimo's philosophy and its relation to theology see; Thomas G. Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

<sup>646</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 7.

a weakening of metaphysical Being through Heidegger and Nietzsche (much like Caputo), and finds its theological paradigm in Pauline *kenosis*.<sup>647</sup>

The latter inaugurates the ‘transcription’ of God into time and history (what Vattimo means by ‘secularization’), which is not simply ‘secular’ in the conventional sense, but a post-secular understanding of Christianity whose “theoretical resolution...is found only in the notion of *caritas*, charity.”<sup>648</sup> For Vattimo, secularization is ‘achieved’ in the Rortian sense,<sup>649</sup> by Christianity itself: “The answer is that Christianity is a stimulus, a message that sets in motion a tradition of thought that will eventually *realize its freedom* from metaphysics.”<sup>650</sup> Although it is clear that Vattimo’s hermeneutics (Nietzschean and Heideggerian, but also influenced by Gadamer), does not subscribe to an Absolute that unfolds in the unity of history,<sup>651</sup> it is hard not to hear the Hegelian tone in statements like: “the history of salvation announced by the Bible realizes itself in world historical events.”<sup>652</sup> This quotation follows a chapter in his *After Christianity* that mediates on the ‘teachings’ of Joachim of Fiore. There Vattimo argues for a theory of secularization after the death of God as a ‘positive affirmation of divinity based on the idea of incarnation.’<sup>653</sup> He accomplishes this with Fiore’s account of the three ages, the third age being the age of the spirit which follows the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The tendency to prioritize Christianity in this historical way elicits Caputo’s protest, not only for its exclusive rhetoric but more importantly for its substantive implications. Vattimo emphasizes that secularization is embedded within the structure of Christianity and claims that the recent recoveries of God in postmodern thought in terms of the wholly other (Levinas,

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<sup>647</sup> Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., pg. 14.

<sup>649</sup> Caputo draws this comparison, which is given additional weight since Vattimo has been in recent dialogue Rorty: see Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo (intro.) *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), and Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Harvard, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1998). For Caputo’s thoughts on Rorty see “Parisian Hermeneutics and Yankee Hermeneutics: The Case of Derrida and Rorty” in John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 84-126; see also his response to Mark Dooley, which emphasizes his worry over Rorty’s unguarded language of ‘achieving’ one’s country, “Achieving The Impossible: Rorty’s Religion: A Response to Mark Dooley” in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo In Focus* (New York: Suny Press, 2003), pp. 229-236.

<sup>650</sup> Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” in Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, Jeffrey Robbins (ed.) *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 27-46; pg. 35. Emphasis added.

<sup>651</sup> Under a more ‘moderate’ reading of Hegel following Gadamer and Benedetto Croce, Vattimo writes, “It is certain that both the reform of dialect urged by Groce...and Gadamer’s exclusion of the absolute spirit in favor of the objective spirit set the experience of truth within an open horizon of projectuality that strips philosophy of any retrospective character.” Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, pg. 139.

<sup>652</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, pg. 41.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid., pg. 37.

Derrida and Caputo) – “without any anti-Semitic implication”<sup>654</sup> he adds – are merely theologies of the ‘old age’ that ignore the incarnation, with the consequence that radical alterity is “the same old God of metaphysics.”<sup>655</sup> For Caputo, not only does this model of secularization misconstrue Levinas, where contra Vattimo it is precisely God’s transcendence as *tout autre* which is made known in the face of the other, but also, and more seriously, the model itself becomes a concealed supersessionism. It can have no meaning in a Jewish context.<sup>656</sup> Judaism is ‘aufgehoben’ in a lineage traceable from Fiora, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach and in recent *death of God* theology. No matter how radical these theologies may be, their Christian ‘pedigree’ repeats the Hegelian gesture (which Derrida already pointed out in *Glas*) betraying a certain ‘crypro-Marcionism.’<sup>657</sup>

With Taylor, Caputo agrees with the delimitation of Hegel vis-à-vis Altizer, but re-emphasizes deconstruction’s ethico-religious claims. With Vattimo, he also wants to affirm the Heideggerian and Nietzschean impulse that ‘weakens’ being, but resists the theory of secularization that maintains Christianity as its exclusive framework. The nuances of these positions allow us to see what is at stake in the debate about Caputo’s postmodern theology. On the one hand, following Taylor, the postmodern gesture seems to collapse into its own disseminative totality without the ethical experience of the other. On the other hand, from Vattimo’s point of view, Caputo’s ethical reading of deconstruction which responds to this totality, devolves into a two world Augustinianism between name/profane and event/sacred. This is why Vattimo advocates for Hegelian dialectic (albeit in a weakened mode) which has its roots in Joachim of Fiora. For, it is only on the Christian model of *kenosis* that God is emptied and inscribed into human history as the movement of the ‘age of spirit.’ The latter is the secularization of Christianity and the embodiment of hospitality and neighborly love (not the estrangement and alienation of Judaism) into the pluralism and non-authoritarianism of tolerant democratic institutions. Caputo’s task, then, is to show how his

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<sup>654</sup> It is not insignificant that Vattimo feels obligated to disavow anti-Jewish sentiments in light of the strong defense he mounts for his, albeit ‘weakened,’ democratic, and progressive version of Christian history. This need to declare sympathy for the Jewish tradition, however, seems to more effectively imply the shortfall of the tradition itself – its inability to recognize Judaism as an end with its own intrinsic value. Even if the historic animosity is undoubtedly lessened by Vattimo, the Jewish tradition, nonetheless, always becomes but a stage in a higher universalism that takes its point of departure from the Christian framework.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid., pg. 38.

<sup>656</sup> Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” pg. 78.

<sup>657</sup> See Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), pg. 195. Critchley identifies this Marcionism in recent readings of Paul by thinkers on the radical left. The figures of Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek in particular. Incidentally, Caputo also has these thinkers in mind: “So difficult is it for this schema to stay clear of this implication of supersessionism that it even shows up in completely secular, atheistic neo-Marxists like Žižek and Badiou when they start singing the praises of love and grace in Saint Paul over the Law, which is death.” Caputo, “Spectral Hermeneutics,” pg. 81.



distinctly postmodern approach to theology avoids the exclusivism that we have seen in thinkers like Vattimo, and at the same time responds to the criticism of an effervescent two-worlds theology with no material substrate. This will be explored below and taken up again in greater detail in the next chapter.

Unlike the Hegelian system, where the Christian religion through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, describes the actual process of becoming of Absolute Spirit, Caputo's Christology of the Christian religion is figurative.<sup>658</sup> That is, events are not governed by the logic of Hegelian dialect, they cut across "the distinctions among various confessions, and even across the distinction between the confessional faiths and secular unbelief."<sup>659</sup> What is important to remember about the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection, therefore, is that they do not communicate one 'controlling event' which can be pre- (or retroactively) determined. But rather, 'events' are what is open-endedly happening within these moments. Caputo's radical theology resists being reduced to an exclusivist position because it views religion and all of its constitutive 'names' as contingent and deconstructible, inscribed as they are within the desert space of 'khoral' *différance*. When Caputo approaches Christianity – for this is the factual reality from where he speaks – he has no intention of sourcing or giving expression to a higher truth or secularizing goal, but rather seeks to give voice to the 'events' that are astir within it. His Christology (a postmodern *theologia crucis*)<sup>660</sup> could be summoned-up in this way: "In the Christian tradition, the force of the event that calls to us and overtakes us in the name of God arises crucially from the cross, where all the lines of force in Christianity intersect (cross)."<sup>661</sup>

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<sup>658</sup> Caputo writes, "religion is an allegory or a parable of the event, that religion tells a story of our existence which reflects all the movements and operations of the event. That is why religious texts so often take the form not of philosophical treatises but of 'fiction' in the strictly literary sense of that word – of narratives, parables and allegories." See Caputo, "The Sense of God," pg. 32.

<sup>659</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 4.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid., pg. 41: "In the end, I am just proposing a theology of the cross." See also Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics," pg. 66. Another aspect of a 'postmodern' theology of the cross must take into account Caputo's views of Jesus more generally. In his writing, Caputo avoids any sort of orthodox high Christology, revelation or the miraculous. This seems to have been drawn from his reading of the New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar under the Westar Institute. On this view, Jesus (Caputo hardly ever refers to 'Christ') was a monotheistic Jew who proclaimed an exemplary message and did not consider himself to be that message. In dialogue with Keith Putt, Putt questions whether adherence to this historical-critical view is not to 'abandon your post and become a modernist.' Caputo's reply is that postmodernity for him is not an abandonment of modernity, but a passing through it. He accepts historical-critical scholarship, "I think that thus far we should all be modern, otherwise we risk lapsing into some kind of fundamentalism." However, postmodernity does not stop there, which is why he goes on to say that what the New Testament offers us is a 'poetics' not a divine logic. See, Olthuis (ed.) *Religion with/out Religion*, pg. 166. For Caputo's specific references to Crossan, see *Weakness of God*, pg. 30; pg. 319, fn. 7; pg. 322, 322, fn. 1, 14.

<sup>661</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 42.



After the metaphysical God is 'crossed out by the cross,' Caputo says, we are left with "God's mark...upon an executed man."<sup>662</sup> The scene of Jesus crucified anticipates neither a deferred salvific moment in which the strength and power of God are more fully on display, nor does it suggest that Jesus was simply 'holding back' his power to adopt only the appearance (*dokein*) of crucifixion. Jesus' death, instead, is a very real, brutal, and tortured execution that accordingly gives way to a different sense of divinity; "the genuine divinity of Jesus is revealed in his distance from the request of magic, in his helplessness, his cry of abandonment, and above all, in the words of forgiveness he utters."<sup>663</sup> The force or 'strength' of the event that one finds in the name of 'God,' emerges from the weakness of Jesus death on the cross, the weakness of God's *ikon*, as Paul says. But this weakness is not valorized. It is a call for justice in the midst of the dominant powers of suppression:

The weak force of God is embodied in the broken body on the cross, which has thereby been broken loose from being and broken out upon the open plane of the powerlessness of God. The power of God is not pagan violence, brute power, or vulgar magic; it is the power of powerlessness, the power of the call, the power of protest that rises up from innocent suffering, and finally, the power to suffer-with (*sym-pathos*) innocent suffering, which is perhaps the central Christian symbol.<sup>664</sup>

The event as the powerless power of the crucifixion is a force that lays claim on us unconditionally without metaphysical authority. In answer, then, to the line of critique that suggests the event is an operation beyond space and time (metaphysics), Caputo is here a definitive materialist in the sense that he does not think there are 'two worlds.'<sup>665</sup> The event that stirs and cries out in the name of God at Calvary is an event of the world and "calls across epochs...cries out from every corpse created by every cruel and unjust power."<sup>666</sup> This is why Caputo later resists the language of transcendence, because it invokes a confusion over the transcendent-immanent binary. Rather, he talks of God's 'insistence' in the world.<sup>667</sup> This

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<sup>662</sup> Ibid.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid, pg. 43.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion," pg. 50.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., pg. 44.

<sup>667</sup> Ibid., pg. 45. "Indeed, rather than speaking of God's transcendence at all, it might be better to speak of God's in-scendence (incendiary inscendence!) or 'insistence' in the world." Caputo makes this comment after the concluding section of the previous chapter titled, "The Transcendence of God." One can see already here a growing dissatisfaction with this language of transcendence. Caputo's project of 'poetics' begun in *Weakness of God* is an attempt to go beyond the binarity of philosophical and theological discourse, and which is further carried out in *Insistence of God* for the reason that Caputo has not quite escaped a Kantian philosophy of religion. This will be explored in the next chapter.

insisting event of the world of which God is but a name does not 'do' anything in terms of causal agency, but rather is the condition of restless, the insisting 'force' in the face of unjust systems. If this force is an insistence, then we are the ones called to bring it into existence: to respond in names, words, and deeds.

In the *Insistence of God* Caputo makes deliberate the interchangeability of God with justice. Derrida writes in the first part of his famous "Force of Law" essay:

'Perhaps' -- one must [*il faut*] always say *perhaps* for justice. There is an *avenir* for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history.<sup>668</sup>

Caputo quotes this text and substitutes the word justice for God.<sup>669</sup> God is justice and justice is God, both to the extent that they are the 'chance of the event;' that which 'exceeds calculation' and in virtue of which history is made possible precisely by that which makes it *impossible*, namely a coming future; justice or God. God, like justice, is but a name for the event; a name for a weak force *without* force that calls and solicits us and lays claim on us. Radical theology, for Caputo, while it concedes the endless chain of substitutions, nonetheless distinguishes Christianity as a unique example of the dramatization of the event in the figure of Jesus. Jesus, the *ikon* of God, enacts and performs the Kingdom of God not only in his ministry but also in his death as a carnal expression of the event of God's weakness. "The weakness of God, the event that is harbored in the name of God, of Jesus, is the weak force or force without force that greets the offender with forgiveness, the enemy with love, the uninvited visitor with hospitality, all of which are profoundly, deeply, divinely, impossible."<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in Gil Anidjar (ed.) *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2010), pg. 257.

<sup>669</sup> Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pg. 9.

<sup>670</sup> Caputo, "The Sense of God," pg. 40.

### III. God *without* Sovereignty

Before turning to the theological-political implications and potentials of Caputo's postmodern theology — how such a theology might cultivate a *theo-poetic* discourse capable of contributing to a 'radical political theology' — it is imperative, by way of conclusion to the present chapter, that we address in no uncertain terms how God is conceived with respect to sovereignty. If we are to follow Caputo in affirming the 'essential' religious nature of deconstruction as this chapter has explained, and subsequently treat a political theology with the resources of radical theology's theopoetics, then anterior to this investigation must be the critique of religious origins viz. the passage from the sovereign God to the God *without* sovereignty. Implicit to the object of this critique, therefore, is the Schmittian claim that political theology is underpinned by sovereignty; sovereignty understood as the capacity to *decide* on the exception and to make an exception of oneself (chapter two). Theologically, this capacity derives its meaning from God. Following Derrida, Caputo affirms this 'unavowed theologism' that coheres in the modern western 'machine of political theology,'<sup>671</sup> which deconstructs by way of a radical theology. The reader will note certain stages of this study have already sought variously to articulate this deconstruction viz. metaphysics (chapter three), religion and ethics (chapter four), and now theology (chapter five). Sovereignty is the notion which links these stages together, as the unchallenged premise that informs the analogy, as old as Plato's *Republic*, between soul, state and universe. More precisely, this analogy is the symbiotic relationship between the sovereignty of God, the sovereignty of the state, its ruler or 'the people,' and finally the sovereignty of the self.<sup>672</sup>

The sovereign God, for Caputo, lies on the side of 'strong' theology and religion. The discourse on God, he says, "is a discourse on the master word *par excellence*, the Lord of history and the master of the universe, the royal power omnipotent."<sup>673</sup> Provoking further, he asks, "is not God the dream of power aplenty, of omnitude and plenitude and plenipotentiarity, of exnihiliatory and annihilatory power... Can one imagine a more permanent presence or a more prestigious *ousia* or a more powerful *parousia* than the 'God' under whose protection the religious powers that be huddle for protection?"<sup>674</sup> Caputo goes on to name a series of classical

<sup>671</sup> See Robert Esposito, Zakiya Hanafi (trans.) *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>672</sup> See John D. Caputo, "Without Sovereignty, Without Being: Unconditionality, The Coming God and Derrida's Democracy To Come," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.3 (August 2003), pp.9-26; pg. 10. See also, John D. Caputo, "Beyond Sovereignty: Many Nations Under The Weakness Of God," in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 89.1-2 (2006), pp. 21-35; pg. 26-27.

<sup>673</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 32.

<sup>674</sup> Ibid.

attributes which, for him, follow from the model of a sovereign God and provide a paradigm for terrestrial sovereignty: God is the Lord of History, the *arche*, the timeless *principium*, the governor of the *ordo universi*, the *prima causa*, the *nomen innominabile* of negative theology, the *puritas essendi*, the *analogia fidei* or *analogia entis*, the *summum ens*, the Platonic Good beyond being, in short, the summation of what Kierkegaard called the God of ‘rouged theology.’<sup>675</sup> God is here beset by conditions: conditions imposed by sovereign imperial theology, which is itself supposedly without conditions when it comes to God’s revelation of himself.<sup>676</sup> Even when we say, as does negative theology, that it is idolatrous to assign conditions to God, it is nonetheless a condition to say God is unconditional, and so we remain trapped by the blackmail and the implied force that will ensue if God’s alterity is compromised.<sup>677</sup>

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<sup>675</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-39.

<sup>676</sup> Caputo, “The Sense of God,” pg. 27.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid. pg. 28. It is quite clear from the cynical breadth of what Caputo considers to be ‘strong’ theology, that he has in mind all theology that expresses a metaphysics of the unity of the One. Apart from those thinkers already alluded to who fall into this category, like the negative theology of Jean-Luc Marion or even some of the *death of God* theologies, Caputo would also assign this ‘strong’ theology to particularly pernicious types of Christian Neoplatonism, depicted by figures like John Milbank and the school of Radical Orthodoxy. While this may be clear enough – given not only the obvious metaphysical tone found in the language of analogical participation, but also the now well established antagonism between Radical Orthodoxy’s agenda and what it considers as the nihilism of postmodernism – one might still ask about the status of other confessional theologies that also have strong traditions of resisting power. Or what about Trinitarian theology that in virtue of the *perichoretic* relations within the Godhead resist easy reductions to simplistic unity? Admittedly, Caputo’s theological writings are conspicuously silent with regard to productive interactions with confessional theology and theology in general, which attempts a more dynamic understanding of the nature of God. Although this is not the direct concern of the current study, and indeed, may be a cite for further investigation, one can still offer a few responses. On an initial and somewhat unimaginative level, but no less important, one can say with regard to confessional theology that this is simply not Caputo’s direct concern. He has never thought of himself as a professional theologian even if he is willing to accept the more recent designation of ‘radical theologian.’ As we have seen, he is more interested in ‘radicalizing’ confessional theology, taking it where it does not want to go. This attitude is better understood, however, not in the sense of disdain but perhaps more clumsily as an attitude of mild disinterest. Indeed, in *The Insistence of God* he talks of radical theology as the ‘becoming-radical of confessional theology’ and that he is ‘not saying anything that confessional theologians would not in a certain way already know.’ (pg.61) The relationship between radical theology and confessional theology, in fact, mimes the ‘Event-Name’ structure: radical theology ‘insists’ and confessional theology ‘exists,’ and it is not a matter of choosing between the two. This connects with the underlying philosophical reason for Caputo’s seeming disinterest in confessional theology as such. Namely, that he would consider them on the one hand, either too wound-up in metaphysical claims that his modern sensibilities would find intolerable, or on the other, they would be too attached to modern claims insufferable for the sensibilities of a postmodernist. In both cases, confessional theology does not survive the critique of Caputo’s primary influences; Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. Thus, despite the very intricate and complex arguments in Trinitarian theology, for example, Caputo would still consign these to the conclave of speculative metaphysics. A part of the burden of the next chapter, however, will be to argue that Caputo’s radical theology is not nearly as disdainful of confessional theology as it has sometimes been made out to be.

For Caputo’s most direct engagement with the school of Radical Orthodoxy see *The Insistence of God*, pp. 136-164, where he charges John Milbank’s Augustinian-Thomist preference for an analogical interpretation of postmodernity as the disturbing practice of the “vintage violence of theological imperialism,” pg. 161. See also his response to Radical Orthodoxy specifically directed at Graham Ward in Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 291-317. For a critical appraisal of Radical Orthodoxy inspired by deconstruction, see Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007) and Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley (eds.) *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric, and Truth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

To think of God outside these sets of conditional claims and somehow to avoid the sovereign force which they imply sounds impossible. Indeed, perhaps this is something only one can dream of, and yet, this is precisely what Caputo asks us to do, to dream and imagine of an 'unconditionality without force.' That is, a sovereign God who does not rule over a kingdom with rules — except of course, for the "rule of the unruly, of the weak and the foolish"<sup>678</sup> — but a God who is sovereign, *without* strength, power, and might. A God who 'rules' according to the quasi-rule of the undeconstructible and unconditional event, "which of itself lacks force or worldly power, lacks an army or an armature, the material means to enforce its will, that is, to forcibly bring about what it is calling for."<sup>679</sup> What can follow from a God who does not have authority or sovereignty, whose kingdom does not have an army to enforce the law? Is this not a kingdom of total chaos and anarchy? 'No,' Caputo would say, or rather, 'not quite.' The event of the kingdom, or what Caputo calls the 'Kingdom of *différance*,'<sup>680</sup> is not simply the logical opposite of the kingdom of a sovereign ruler, it is the possibility of *the* impossible kingdom, where radical theology names the activity which seeks to describe this kingdom's disruptive forces, the events that are taking place there, of which God is but a name. For Caputo, the New Testament, and especially the sayings of Jesus, his life and ministry, are supreme exemplars of this kingdom, what he calls the 'an-archic' or 'sacred anarchy' of the kingdom of God. In a series of deconstructive interpretations of the scriptures, which are meant to be read not as logical prose but as expressions of the prioritization of the impossible, Caputo shows how to replace the logic of sovereignty by a poetics that rightly testifies to the foolishness that the Christian *kerygma* is for the world, as it is expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>681</sup>

God *without* sovereignty, therefore, is a God re-conceived according to the force of God's withdrawal from the plane of being to the order of the event. The order of the event, however, is not an 'other worldly' locality that does not affect human experience, it is the condition of im/possibility for experience itself, because it resists the resistance to the event and thus 'prepares' for the event's coming. In reading Caputo's radical theology, the danger and mistake that is often made is to read it according to conventional theological terminology. This error produces the undesirable outcome that his theology is rendered too 'idealistic' and lacking 'material' content. Indeed, the effect of his writing can leave one wondering what exactly 'is' going on in radical theology. There is a sense in which the circular repetition of the

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<sup>678</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 27.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., pg. 29.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid., pp. 125-282.

text in *Weakness of God* creates a momentum of the words and sentences that seem to slip and slide into each other, leaving their meaning hanging on to what preceded, while at the same time calling and desiring more meaning and content. This kind of hybrid writing is, no doubt, Caputo's performance of deconstructive theology and its achievement is the invention of a *theo-poetic* discourse. It seems here, as Caputo calls it, the 'hermeneutical key' is to be found not only for the practice of radical theology in general, but in particular the construction of a 'theo-political-poetic' conception of sovereignty, or what will be called a radical *political* theology.



# Chapter Six

## The Event of Sovereignty

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*Sovereignty is the object which eludes us all, which nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but are doomed to seek it.*

- Georges Bataille<sup>682</sup>

### I. Introduction

In this final chapter, we return to the political nature of sovereignty with which this study began. If much of Caputo's radical theology as we have seen, has Derrida's later work in the background with its particular critique of sovereignty in the context of twenty-first century politics, then another stage in our argument will be to include a discussion that clarifies this specific Derridian contribution. Section two of this chapter entails revisiting the *Rogues* essay encountered in chapter one – Derrida's most explicit engagement with sovereignty – as well as other relevant writings including, inter alia, *The Politics of Friendship* (1994)<sup>683</sup> and the well-known "Force of Law" (1993) essay.<sup>684</sup> Far from a comprehensive engagement with what are already massively over-interpreted texts, the more precise concern of this section will be to develop Derrida's thinking on sovereignty with particular interest to Carl Schmitt. Recalling remarks from chapter two, Schmitt's critique of liberalism, the definition of sovereignty and political theology, are arguably the defining moments of interest for political, legal and a number of continental philosophers. In the latter case, this has become particularly relevant for those who find Schmitt's critique incisive for elaborating the conceits of liberal democracy. His decisionistic preferences, broadly speaking, have also re-introduced the possibility of a materialistic transcendence into the political realm. It is perhaps not surprising then, given the overtly theological character of Schmitt's thinking on sovereignty and politics, that he

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<sup>682</sup> Georges Bataille, Alastair Hamilton (trans.) *Evil and Literature* (London: Calder and Boyers, 1973), pp. 193-194.

<sup>683</sup> Jacques Derrida, George Collins (trans.) *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>684</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in Gil Anidjar (ed.) *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 230-300.

would raise both the curiosity and critique of many theologians and philosophers. Derrida falls into a category that affirms much of Schmitt's depiction of sovereignty, while at the same time exposing it to its own deconstruction and offering an alternative in the form of a sovereign or 'god to come.'

Section three, however, takes into consideration that Derrida's contribution and interest in sovereignty remains just one among many, and thus will need to be distinguished from other contemporary scholarship, particularly those who have been critical of the 'postmodern' viability of the political. In this regard, we turn to a group of left-leaning continental philosophers who are united with Schmitt's rejection of liberalism and parliamentary democracy. These thinkers, including Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, are critical of the type of postmodernism they assign to Derrida, calling out its liberal prejudices and anti-materialist rhetoric as unable to break from the deadlock of postmodern irony that supposedly re-instantiates the logic of Late-Capitalism. Following the lexicon employed in this study, these philosophers develop their own theories of 'event' that involve distinctly capitalized responses to contemporary politics, namely, subjective fidelity to the 'Truth' of the event (Badiou), faith in 'pure' violence (Agamben), and the 'Event' which occurs in an 'absolute present' (Žižek).

Despite the trenchant and valuable critiques that they mount against liberal economy and the inefficiencies of democratic politics, their whole-sale rejection of liberal democracy as such offers little in terms of alternatives, and perhaps worse, reveals potentially violent instantiations of the event in the present. Drawing on the work of the theologian Jayne Svenungsson, these limitations will be clarified by arguing that they characterize an unguarded resonance of the Schmittian desire for presence — a 'politics of presence' that echoes the sentiments expressed in chapter two. However, notwithstanding the cynical elements in Badiou, Agamben and Žižek, and given what now appears as the unambiguous prognosis of democracy's crisis, the polemical engagement with these thinkers is not meant to be a final word on the efficacy of their thought for our contemporary political climate. It serves rather to expose the stakes of the materialist vision of sovereignty. The series of questions that their critique of postmodernism raises, therefore, would be if Derrida's sovereignty *without* sovereignty and his dream of a 'god to come' does indeed terminate in an endless deferral without substantive effect on the workings of daily politics? Is the event not a postponement of justice which keeps the destitute in a position of subjugation while the apparatus of globalized capitalism continues unchecked? Are we not trapped in the circular

logic of difference, unable to effect genuine change to our political and economic systems? By speaking of sovereignty *and* the event, do we not insinuate an idealist binary whereby the event becomes a fantastical illusion that passes us by — a ‘to come’ that we dare not approach lest its totalitarian consequences consume us? Whether or not Derrida has himself achieved a materialist rendering of politics is an ongoing source of dissensus and remains outside the scope of this study. But to the extent that Caputo is an interpreter of Derrida and thus a contributor to this debate, it is hoped that we have shown thus far, at least preliminarily in Caputo’s religious reading of deconstruction, that Derrida does not reject matter or the material world, but in fact that it is deconstruction which makes matter really matter. The event for Derrida is not an occurrence ‘in’ time, Caputo would say, because it is the structure of time itself. It constitutes this structure in virtue of which something is always irreducibly outstanding — ‘ahead’ or still ‘coming.’ The event, therefore, is not an idealization of time toward which we asymptotically move, but rather an intensification of time in the material present.<sup>685</sup>

Nonetheless, Caputo will have registered some of the doubts and complaints not only of Derrida, but also of his own religious formulation of a ‘religion *without* religion’ culminating in *Weakness of God* (2006). Section four will attend to a series of ‘external’ movements in the field of philosophy, as well as some ‘internal’ tensions emerging in Caputo’s work that lead him in the follow-up book, *The Insistence of God* (2013), not so much to a revision of the core theses of *Weakness of God*, but rather a re-formulation of its argument designed to more visibly state a material orientation of radical theology’s *theopoetics*. The crucial development that makes this move discernable is Caputo’s further elaboration of theopoetics alongside a ‘newfound Hegelianism,’ arising from a critical view of Kantian-postmodern philosophy of religion.

At this point, the study draws to a conclusion in two final movements. First, in taking up the developments of this re-casted theopoetics, a poetic prescription or itinerary of the ‘three pills’ of radical theology will be presented. These three pills of theopoetics constitute the ‘pharmaceuticals’ of a radical theology and thus provide the cure/poison (*pharmakon*)<sup>686</sup> for thinking ‘theopoetically’ about sovereignty. It is here that the ‘constructive’ proposal set out

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<sup>685</sup> Perhaps Caputo’s most succinct outline of this reading of Derrida is to be found in his short essay, “Temporal Transcendence: The Very Idea of *à venir* in Derrida,” in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 188-203.

<sup>686</sup> Jacques Derrida, Barbara Johnson (trans.) “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981).

in the introduction of this study bears its fruit, namely, that the theopoetics of a radical theology does indeed offer the resources to think a radical political theology. However, following arguments developed by Johann Meylahn, it will also be noted that this constructive proposal or prescription of radical theopoetics cannot itself be reduced to a simple thematization, lest theopoetics become a ‘third-way’ solution. In the second and final movement we turn to Derrida’s reading of Paul Celan from his last seminars collected in *Sovereignty and the Beast* (2001-2002).<sup>687</sup> There we find Derrida dreaming of a “more majestic or otherwise majestic, more sovereign and otherwise sovereign...majesty of poetry.” Celan’s poetry, he says, “prepare[s] perhaps some poetic revolution in the political revolution,”<sup>688</sup> which is what we are arguing is the virtue of a radical political theology. This is the dream of Caputo’s theopoetics of a God without sovereignty, which articulates a *poetic* revolution of sovereignty altogether – a revolution of theology’s ‘unavowed theologism.’

At this conclusion, which is always and only tentative, we might say that this study will have hoped to have moved beyond the guiding paradigm of the two dividing axes, ‘sovereignty and the event’ to the preferred locution of the ‘*event of sovereignty*.’ The sliding signification of ‘the event of sovereignty’ is driven by the deliberate sense of ambiguity in the use of the double genitive. As in Derrida’s “Force of Law” essay, where he says the “law [*le droit*] is both threatening and threatened by itself,” a “threat of law” is a “[d]ouble genitive: it both comes from law and threatens law,”<sup>689</sup> so too is the ‘event of sovereignty.’ It comes both from sovereignty (the always immanent possibility of its force), and is visited upon sovereignty (the impossible possibility of its arrival). Here re-surfaces the leitmotif of ‘threat’ and ‘ruin’ – the ‘ruins of sovereignty.’ Indeed, a few paragraphs after having referred to the necessary ‘iterability of law’s foundation’ and, thus, the deconstruction between founding and preserving violence, Derrida declares:

Ruin is not a negative thing...One cannot love a monument, a work of architecture, an institution as such except in an experience itself precarious in its fragility; it has not always been there, it will not always be there, it is finite. And for this reason one loves it as mortal, through its birth and its death, through one’s own birth and death, through the ghost

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<sup>687</sup> Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington (trans.), Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud (eds.) *The Beast and The Sovereign* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, [2009] 2011).

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>689</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law,” pp. 275-276.

or the silhouette of its ruin, one's own ruin — which it already is, therefore,  
or already prefigures.<sup>690</sup>

The love for this monument of sovereignty that we are all 'doomed to seek' as Bataille remarks, 'eludes us all.' It has not always been there and will not always be there, because it is fragile and ruined from the start. And it is precisely for this reason — this loss and this ruin — that we desire and love it all the more in its mortality, through its own birth and death and silhouette of its ruin.

## II. Sovereignty *without* Sovereignty

If Derrida's deconstruction of sovereignty involves a polemical engagement with Schmitt, then it is worth considering the context from which it emerges before examining this deconstruction. This context is historically related to the end of communism, new fundamentalist Islam, the rise of immigration into Europe, and the perceived triumph of liberal democracy. It brought to the fore in Derrida's thinking the more explicit articulation of themes relating to religion, politics, and faith, which he began discussing in the late 80's and 90's.<sup>691</sup> Along with other thinkers around this time (Vattimo and Trías), Derrida's interest in religion was of course not inclined toward a desire for metaphysics of which the century of *the death of God* had been deprived, but rather was orientated toward religious resources capable of offering alternatives that could both avoid the violence of metaphysics and the devastating utopianisms of the twentieth century. The impact of religion and especially its Christian manifestation, while not an overt feature of public life in the twentieth century, was felt, nonetheless, in its secularized dialectic-historical interpretation. Hence, while the achievements of Enlightenment reason were to be recognized, one could not simply do away with religion. Derrida, therefore, affirmed that our common (Western European) culture is inescapably Christian and 'Latinized,' a universal form of religion, which he called '*globolatinization*.'<sup>692</sup>

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid., pg. 278.

<sup>691</sup> One could cite the famous Capri seminar held in 1994 as symbolic of this shift in thinking. In the introductory comments to the volume published after that seminar in 1996, Vattimo says that the thematic of religion represented a 'spirit of the times.' See Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.) *Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), pg. vii. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer's contextualizing remarks which appear at the conclusion of this volume, pp. 200-211.

<sup>692</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in Gil Anidjar (ed.) *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pg. 67.

It is in the context of this religious legacy that Derrida believes (following Schmitt) the concept of sovereignty has been bequeathed.<sup>693</sup> Here sovereignty uniquely evinces the coincidence of the Christian religion and Western political history. Echoing Schmitt, Derrida says that so many “fundamental concepts that often permit us to isolate or to *pretend* to isolate the *political* – restricting ourselves to this particular circumspection – remain religious or in any case theologico-political.”<sup>694</sup> Following this comment in “Faith and Knowledge,” he immediately cites Schmitt as an example of how “in one of the most rigorous attempts to isolate in its purity the sphere of the political...Carl Schmitt was obliged to acknowledge that the ostensibly purely political categories to which he resorted were the product of a theologico-political secularization.”<sup>695</sup> He goes on to claim that so many of our concepts associated with democracy, “including those of the sovereign state, of the citizen-subject, of public and private space, etc., still entails that is religious, inherited in truth from a determinate religious stratum.”<sup>696</sup> Even though Derrida suggests, along with Schmitt, that our contemporary political and legal notions are ineluctably entangled with the ontotheological foundations of Christianity, he also wants to re-read this history and to expose it to its own (im)possibilities. Indeed, Derrida’s polemical engagement with Schmitt’s political theology is not to destroy these foundations, but rather to dismantle and deconstruct them by problematizing the notion of ‘foundation’ as such – a ‘mystical’ foundation, as he will call it in “Force of Law.” As will be argued below, if read in tandem with Caputo, Derrida’s disassemblage of Schmitt’s political theology of sovereignty suggests the possibility of a ‘radical political theology’ and ‘perhaps’ a ‘poetic revolution’ of sovereignty altogether.<sup>697</sup>

## I. The Friend-Enemy Deconstruction

Derrida’s interest in the theologico-political and sovereignty in his later work is unambiguously tied to the thought of Carl Schmitt. As Michael Nass observes, “What interests

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<sup>693</sup> The religious significance of modern concepts is of course not limited to sovereignty for Derrida. To cite only two other examples: of religious tolerance, he writes, “The word ‘tolerance’ is first of all marked by a religious war between Christians, or between Christians and non-Christians. Tolerance is a *Christian* virtue...Though I clearly prefer shows of tolerance to shows of intolerance, nonetheless still have certain reservations about the word ‘tolerance’ and the discourse it organizes. It is a discourse with religious roots.” See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy In A Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 126-127. Another politically implicated concept that is deeply linked with Christianity is the death penalty, as Derrida makes clear in his 1999-2000 and 2000-1 seminars. See Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, Marc Crépon and Thomas Dutoit (eds.) and Peggy Kamuf (trans.) *The Death Penalty: Volume I* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014).

<sup>694</sup> Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” pg. 63.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid., pg. 64.

<sup>697</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and The Sovereign*, pp. 272-273; we will return to this idea of ‘poetic revolution.’



Derrida about Schmitt is his claim that sovereignty is always related to the sovereign exception...that this relationship between sovereignty and exceptionality is inextricable – even in modern democracies – from the theological notion of a sovereign God.”<sup>698</sup> If there were any doubts about the importance Derrida assigns to Schmitt’s conjunction of sovereignty and theology, whether or not one agrees with the way it has been diagnosed, these doubts are surely allayed by the comments made in his interview with Elisabeth Roudinesco in *For What Tomorrow...*:

Without this category of exception, we cannot understand the concept of sovereignty. Today, the great question is indeed, everywhere, that of sovereignty. Omnipresent in our discourses and in our axioms, under its own name or another, literally or figuratively, this concept has a theological origin: the true sovereign is God. The concept of this authority or of this power was transferred to the monarch, said to have a ‘divine right.’ Sovereignty was then delegated to the people, in the form of a democracy, or to the nation, with the same theological attributes as those attributed to the king and to God.<sup>699</sup>

Derrida’s first unambiguous engagement with Schmitt appears in *Politics of Friendship*, where he addresses one of the central claims necessary for upholding the latter’s definition of the political, namely, the morally exacting decision on the exception as well as the ability to decide on the distinction between friend and enemy. To briefly recap: we saw in chapter two how Schmitt’s philosophy of history provided the metaphysical context for his political theology. It was argued that Schmitt deploys the distinctly Christian trope of the *katechon*, so as to defend the priority of the decision in the political moment that maintains order over and against chaos. Such a theologization of history underscores the urgency which inspires Schmitt’s political theology and motivates the desire to pursue a functional analogy between theological and political phenomena. The state, as the embodiment of the sovereign, displays its monopoly on all political decision-making by exerting the extra-ordinary quality of this sovereign authority, that is, by definition its ability to decide on the exception to the law. The quasi-theological role of a sovereign God (paralleled by ‘the miracle’ which interrupts the natural order) that the state now assumes is legitimized by this transgressive act and further authorizes the state to decide its friends and enemies. It is to this notion of sovereignty as tied

<sup>698</sup> Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pg. 65.

<sup>699</sup> Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, Jeff Fort (trans.) *For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 91-92; quoted in *Ibid*.

to the possibility of the political decision and the ‘concrete determination’ between friends and enemies that Derrida problematizes in his discussion with Schmitt in *The Politics of Friendship*.

*The Politics of Friendship* is a long meditation on friendship, democracy and the political, organized around an apostrophe attributed to Aristotle by Diogenes Laertius and apocryphally quoted by Montaigne, “O my friends, there is no friend!”<sup>700</sup> Along with an interrogation of the predominance of male sexual difference – the phallogocentrism of the brother and the political concept of fraternity – Derrida devotes much of the book to Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction. Forced as we are to condense a powerful reading, Derrida’s argument with respect to Schmitt is that he operates under a “fundamentally Christian politics” made possible by a “Christian metaphysics of subjectivity.”<sup>701</sup> Accordingly, underlying this metaphysics is “an instance of the subject, a classic free and willful subject.”<sup>702</sup> As we have seen with Caputo (i.e. the categories of the heteronomic and heteromorphic), in virtue of the fact that “the adequation between the concept, the name, and the event [can] never be assured,”<sup>703</sup> this autonomous actively deciding subject is always exposed to its other. The subject of Schmittian decisionism for Derrida, is in fact “*incapable of accounting for the slightest decision*,” because while, “Certainly the decision makes the event...it also neutralizes this happening that must surprise both the freedom and the will of every subject.”<sup>704</sup> Derrida does not want to disavow the decision, but rather wants to recast it under the customary influence of Levinas, by what he calls the ‘passive decision:’ he writes, “the passive decision, condition of the event, is always in me, structurally, another event, a rending decision as the decision of the other.”<sup>705</sup> Schmitt’s Christian subject, which decides on the sovereign exception and the determination of the friend and enemy, is unable to account for this ‘passive decision’ because it does not recognize that “the decision is not only always exceptional,” but also that “*it makes an exception off/for me.*”<sup>706</sup>

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<sup>700</sup> Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, pp. 1-2; pg. 177. Of course, the obscure provenance of the phrase is a part of Derrida’s reading that wants to complicate the classical axiomatic of friendship. For Caputo’s commentary on this text see, “Who Is Derrida’s Zarathustra? Of Fraternity, Friendship, and a Democracy to Come,” in *Research in Phenomenology* 29 (1999), pp. 184-198.

<sup>701</sup> Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, pg. 84, 243.

<sup>702</sup> Ibid., pg. 68.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid., pg. 66.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid., pg. 68.

<sup>705</sup> Ibid.

<sup>706</sup> Ibid., pg. 69.

The ‘passive decision’ as an aporia of deconstruction means that sovereignty is not negated – we do not experience sheer passivity according to Derrida. This experience of exception, “the supposed norm of all decision, exonerates from no responsibility.” We are still held to be responsible, “responsible for myself before the other...and also *responsible for the other before the other*.”<sup>707</sup> This notion of responsibility is not merely a moral exhortation but is rather a structural feature of Derrida’s philosophy (via Levinas) that is constitutive of subjectivity as such. As Clayton Crockett suggests, following the Indian philosopher Saitya Brata Das, “The true, messianic exception [in contrast to Schmitt’s exceptionality of the sovereign with respect to law] is the general case of exception that makes us responsible as subjects for an other.”<sup>708</sup> And crucially, “This exceptionality both constitutes and ruins responsibility because it makes us responsible, but also makes us irresponsible, because we can never do justice to the other, not even to ourselves as other.”<sup>709</sup> Beyond the aporia of a ‘responsible irresponsibility,’ the initial value of Derrida’s reading here is the incisive way in which the *determination* of political distinctions effects the process of subjectification.

Derrida goes on to relate the impact of this questionable subjective determination between the friend and enemy to another opposition, the public and private. For Schmitt, “the disappearance of the enemy would be the death knell of the political as such.”<sup>710</sup> The distinction between friend-enemy, however, is not so much a matter of ‘political difference’ as it is of “*determined* opposition.”<sup>711</sup> This determination of the enemy has always been, according to Schmitt, a ‘public’ estimation of hostility (*hostis*) opposed to private enmity (*inimicus*), where the latter would be politically meaningless. Schmitt argues that:

The enemy can only be an ensemble of grouped individuals, confronting an ensemble of the same nature, engaged in at least a virtual struggle, that is, one that is effectively possible (*Feind ist nur eine wenigstens eventuell, d.h. der realen Möglichkeit nach kämpfende Gesamtheit von Menschen die einer ebensolchen Gesamtheit gegenübersteht*).<sup>712</sup>

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<sup>707</sup> Ibid.

<sup>708</sup> Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pg. 50.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.

<sup>710</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, pg. 84.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid., pg. 85. Emphasis added.

<sup>712</sup> Ibid., pg. 86. This is Derrida’s modified quotation from *The Concept of the Political*, pg. 28.

Derrida finds in this passage a movement from ‘possibility to eventuality,’ that “rushes into place...the tank is replenished in the present...by allegation of presence.”<sup>713</sup> This due to the appearance of the present participle (*kampfende*) between a minimal eventuality of struggle and its real possibility (*reale Möglichkeit*) and suggests “as soon as war is possible, it is taking place.”<sup>714</sup> According to Derrida, Schmitt does not account for the criterion of this distinction between “the quasi-transcendental modality of the possible and the historico-factual modality of the eventual,” he thereby deduces the concept of the enemy in an ‘a priori fashion:’ “[a]s soon as war is possible-eventual, the enemy is present.”<sup>715</sup> The outcome of this reduction is that Schmitt thinks he is able to purify the concept of political conflict – of all personal affect, love or feeling, that is, the private – and construe it as that which is properly public. The “totally pure experience of the friend-enemy in its political essence,” he writes, is deduced from the antithesis of friendship which is not private enmity but rather public hostility.<sup>716</sup> Here Derrida registers the collapse of Schmitt’s discourse. It is unable to maintain the border between public and private and, thus, avoid the contamination of friend with enemy. Schmitt wants to defend the political, and in order to do so one must not lose sight of ‘who’ the enemy is. But nothing stops (not even the historic appeal Schmitt makes to the tradition of Plato, which Derrida dismantles at length)<sup>717</sup> the “possibility of semantic slippage and inversion,” where instead of hostility toward the enemy, we have hostility – “a war without hatred” – toward the friend. Friend becomes enemy and private becomes public. And conversely, “I can, in privacy, love my enemy,” and so the public becomes private.<sup>718</sup> It is against the threat of this ruinous self-contamination, Derrida says, that Schmitt defends his discourse, “walls itself up, reconstructs itself unendingly against what is to come.”<sup>719</sup>

The root behind Derrida’s critique of Schmitt’s concept of the political is a disquiet over what appears as a ‘phenomenological procedure’ and an ‘eidetic reduction,’<sup>720</sup> which manifests itself in the supposed achievement of the *eidos* of the political – the purity of the concept in a “Platonic dream.”<sup>721</sup> Derrida argues that the difference between private and public (and all of Schmitt’s other Platonic attempts at justification, *inter alia*: *pólemos/stásis*, *inimicus/hostis*) can never be found, at least not *concretely*. As a result:

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<sup>713</sup> Ibid.

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid., pg. 87.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid., pg. 89-106.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid., pg. 88.

<sup>719</sup> Ibid.

<sup>720</sup> Ibid., pg. 87.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid., pg. 116.

the purity of *pólemos* or the enemy, whereby Schmitt would define the political, remains unattainable. The concept of the political undoubtedly corresponds, as concept, to what the ideal discourse can *want* to state most rigorously on the ideality of the political. But no politics has ever been adequate to its concept. No political event can be correctly described or defined with recourse to these concepts. And this inadequation is not accidental, since politics is essentially a *prâxis*, as Schmitt himself always implies.<sup>722</sup>

Derrida, thus, identifies the contradiction in Schmitt's thought: on the one hand, Schmitt pursues the meaning of the political in its 'adequation' to conceptual ideality, and on the other hand, he himself recognizes that determination needs to be at the same time, concrete and in 'praxis,' in its 'polemical sense.' But, as we have just seen, he fails to maintain the polemical distinction: "*pólemos* remains...naturally and irreducibly blurred."<sup>723</sup> And yet, for all these paradoxes, Schmitt will go to great lengths to preserve the "impure purity of the political as such, of the properly political...And that this 'as such' should dissipate our doubts concerning what 'friend and 'enemy' mean."<sup>724</sup> Here our doubts must disappear "not so much relative to the meaning of friendship or hostility but, above all, relative to *who* the friend and enemy are," that is, the matter of 'practical identification.'<sup>725</sup>

In the end, the practice of identification of self and other (the enemy) and the concrete determination of 'who' the enemy is — regardless of 'what' the enemy could 'mean' in its essence — in Schmitt's 'politico-*logico*' discourse (a discourse whose subject is dominated by the traits of sovereign ethical autarky and autonomy) situates his politics of enmity under the 'canonical concept' of friendship: the natal-natural-national fraternity of the male bond dominating the Western canon with remarkable ubiquity. Schmitt's political order requires the threat of annihilation of the other to maintain peace. The sphere in which this existential threat and upright (phallic) hostility of war is to be maintained is, unsurprisingly, occupied by male figures; soldiers, men at war, comrades, brothers in arms, to which Derrida rightly asks: "What about the sister?"<sup>726</sup> Indeed, there is "not a woman in sight." You would look "in vain for the figure of a woman, a feminine silhouette, and the slightest allusion to sexual difference"

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<sup>722</sup> Ibid., pg. 114.

<sup>723</sup> Ibid., pg. 115.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid., pg. 116.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid.

<sup>726</sup> Ibid., pg. 96.

in Schmitt's 'logic of fraternization.'<sup>727</sup> *Politics of Friendship* exposes Schmitt's male-centric *Kampf's* philosophy – and indeed, the entire enclosed circle of democratic politics open only to the fraternities of brotherhood – to a “feminized, effete *Kampflosigkeit*,” Caputo writes, “a state and culture lacking political definition that would make a real man blush.”<sup>728</sup> For Derrida's part, the politics of friendship is not about the ever present threat of the annihilation of the other, but rather of the *affirmation* of the other, so that when we hear ‘O my friends, there are no friends,’ we hear the vocative, the call to us who are friends in mutuality of community that there is *another* concept of friendship. A concept that is open ended, which does not annul friendship or community, but puts them at risk with this “impossible axiomatic which remains to be thought.”<sup>729</sup>

## II. Between Law and Justice

As has been argued throughout this study, Caputo's reading of Derrida is one that operates on a fundamental optimism or faith about deconstruction, or rather, that deconstruction ‘is’ a certain faith or optimism. Deconstruction is not a dissolution of concepts (like the subject, friendship, community, sovereignty, the decision, the political, or God) but is rather a re-orientation that occurs from within (‘events which they contain’) exposing them to the possibility of something wholly other. This possibility is ‘perhaps impossible,’ not because the dream of an *X without X* is a realm of perfectability toward which we are asymptotically approaching, but because this is the very futural ‘to come-structure’ of the present itself. This ‘essential’ optimism or faith in a dream about something *a venir* with respect to sovereignty, the political, and Carl Schmitt, which we have just seen in *The Politics of Friendship*, is perhaps nowhere more clearly articulated than in Derrida's later works, “Force of Law” and *Rogues*.

Like so many of Derrida's political-legal texts, “Force of Law” has evoked much commentary. The purpose of our interest, as Gil Anidjar writes in his brief introduction to this essay is that “Carl Schmitt's argument...is furthered that law (*loi* and *droit*, *Gesetz* and *Recht*)—the juridical—constitutes the site where the complex history of the theologico-political comes to the fore.”<sup>730</sup> We will focus on the first part of the essay, where we will see Schmitt's personalist

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<sup>727</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156. Derrida's full quotation is worth repeating: “Yes, but men, men and more men, over centuries of war, and costumes, hats, uniforms, soutanes, warriors, colonels, generals, partisans, strategists, politicians, professors, political theoreticians, theologians. In vain would you look for a figure of a woman, feminine silhouette, and the slightest allusion to sexual difference.”

<sup>728</sup> Caputo, “Who Is Derrida's Zarathustra?”, pp. 194-195.

<sup>729</sup> Ibid., pg. 187.

<sup>730</sup> Jacques Derrida, Gil Anidjar (ed.) *Acts of Religion*, pg. 228.



view of the sovereign subject and the necessity of the decision, disrupted by Derrida's aporia of undecidability referred to in the opposition between law and justice.

The distinction between law and justice that Derrida formulates in this essay replays the now recognizable opposition between generality and singularity, between the representational edifice of the legal system and the irreducible justice that is owed to the other.<sup>731</sup> One would miss the radical force of Derrida's claims in 'Force of Law' if one were to reduce this opposition to a simple priority for the singular at the expense of the general.<sup>732</sup> Law may be the 'element of calculation' and, therefore, is not justice, but "it is just that there be law."<sup>733</sup> The aporetic tension between law and justice is supported in the following passage:

An address is always singular, idiomatic, and justice, as law [*droit*], seems always to suppose the generality of a rule, a norm or a universal imperative. How to reconcile the act of justice that must always concern singularity, individuals, groups, irreplaceable existences, the other or myself *as* other, in a unique situation, with rule, norm, value, or the imperative of justice that necessarily have a general form, even if this generality prescribes a singular application.<sup>734</sup>

The paradox Derrida is communicating here involves, on the one hand, the necessity of law to relate to the other in the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of the situation (otherwise it could not be said to exercise itself in the name of justice) and on the other, the necessity of justice to take on the general form of law in order for it to be 'en-forced' or actualized. Evidently, Derrida is not contending that a possible experience of justice is a pure event, or a pure instance of justice around which the law congeals to establish its representative system. On the contrary, as Derrida has been saying since his earliest writing, the pure event or originary act of justice is always already inscribed within an iteration or repetition, and thus, the distinction between law and justice is not so much an opposition as it is a mutual contamination. Justice, for Derrida, does not simply come to rest in the back-and-forth of this tension, rather, its mutual contamination is the requirement of "the very experience of the aporia," which is what he

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<sup>731</sup> "...between justice (infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic) and the exercise of justice as law or right [*droit*], legitimacy, legality, stabilizable and statutory, calculable, a system of regulated and coded prescriptions." Ibid., pg. 250.

<sup>732</sup> This is apparently often the case in legal scholarship where liberal readers of this text, whether sympathetic or critical of Derrida's thought, oversimplify his emphasis on singularity. See Jacques de Ville, *Jacques Derrida: Law as Absolute Hospitality* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 141-153.

<sup>733</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law", pg. 244.

<sup>734</sup> Ibid., pg. 245.

means by the *mystical* foundation of authority.<sup>735</sup> This foundation is not to be understood as a synthesis of these oppositions, indeed, it is rather a non-foundational “differential of force...of force as *différance* or force of *différance*,”<sup>736</sup> what we might call the ‘weak force.’ (‘Weakness’ here does not intend to re-instantiate the weak vs. strong binary. It is better understood as the differential forces that makes this binarity possible. Below it will be argued that this locution of ‘weakness’ is ultimately confused by readers of Caputo, because it brings to mind the opposition just mentioned. This is why Caputo somewhat departs from this language in *Insistence of God*.)

The ‘mystical’ foundation of authority once again alludes implicitly to Schmitt’s conception of an ultimately Christian subjectivity — insofar as it is an autonomous, self-positing sovereign that makes an exception of itself. In discussion with Montaigne and Pascal, Derrida points toward the ‘fictional’ (and thus mystical) foundation of laws; laws are extended a credit and belief not because they are just, but simply because they are laws.<sup>737</sup> The implication being that in the absence of natural law, the self-positing anchoring of the modern Christian subject<sup>738</sup> that creates positive laws, has its foundation not in itself, but in the fiction or faith entangled within this self-positing. At this point we can see the emergence of the ‘new concept’ — an ‘originary’ faith or fictional law (the ‘law of law’) which precedes the distinction between faith/fiction and knowledge/fact. Derrida had memorably explored this in ‘Faith and Knowledge,’<sup>739</sup> and Caputo described it as Derrida’s quasi-messianic ‘Ankhôral Religion’:

Religion as a universal messianicity despoiled of all messianism, as faith without dogma advancing in the risk of absolute night, is the foundation of the law, the law of the law, the origin of institution and constitution, the performative event which does not belong to the whole that it founds or inaugurates, which Derrida elsewhere called the ‘mystical force’ of law.<sup>740</sup>

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<sup>735</sup> Ibid., pg. 244.

<sup>736</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-235.

<sup>737</sup> Montaigne writes, “Lawes are now maintained in credit, not because they are just, but because they are lawes. It is the mystical foundation of their authority; they have none other.” Ibid., pp. 240-241.

<sup>738</sup> Schmitt is in fact a liberal thinker here according to Heidegger. See Laurence Paul Hemming, “Heidegger’s claim ‘Carl Schmitt thinks as a Liberal,’” in *Journal for Cultural Research* 20.3 (2016), pp. 286-294. “It is through its self-unfolding self-assertion (and so not out of how it itself is *unfolded*) that the friend/enemy distinction appears. The state is not *brought into being*, but rather, like the subject of which it is the absolute (self-)realization, *posits itself*.” Pg. 289.

<sup>739</sup> Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” pp. 42-101. For a close reading of this text see Michael Naas’, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and the Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

<sup>740</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 154-156; pg. 155.

What would a faith without dogma ‘advancing in the risk of absolute night’ mean? This brings us back to the nature of the decision and the ‘experience of aporia.’ How does one confront decision/judging justly with respect to law without devolving into Schmittian decisionism on the one hand, or paralytic indecision on the other? Derrida introduces three aporias in a legal context: the first ‘*Epokhē* of the Rule’ or ‘aporia of suspension,’ the second aporia of ‘The Haunting of the Undecidability’ and finally, ‘The Urgency That Obstructs the Horizon of Knowledge.’

The first aporia states that for a judge to judge justly, it is never simply the application of a norm to a situation, the law must be ‘suspended’ to address the case’s specificity and then provide a ‘fresh judgement.’ At the same time, for a judgement to be just and ‘responsible’ it cannot destroy the law but must be regulated by it. Hence, in the aporia the judgement is just when the law’s regulatory rule is preserved precisely by its suspension or deregulation.<sup>741</sup> We might describe the approach in this aporia as more pragmatic, especially when seen with respect to the second aporia.

In the second aporia, ‘The Haunting of the Undecidability,’ Derrida again replays the ‘oscillation’ between the generality of law and norms (“respect for equality and universal right”) and the singularity of the idiosyncratic (“the always heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example”).<sup>742</sup> However, the ‘undecidable’ here, contrary to the negligibility of reserved oscillation – what critics perceive as indecision or relativism – is the *experience* or ‘the test and ordeal’ of being delivered over to this ‘impossible decision.’ Even if the “test and ordeal of the undecidable [has been] passed...the decision has again followed a rule...it is no longer *presently* just, *fully* just.”<sup>743</sup> The italics here signal that the just judgement is always inscribed by the undecidable and, therefore, strictly no decision is ever ‘fully’ just. Thus, Caputo remarks, “far from undermining decision...‘undecidability’ is what assures that judging will be judging, and not merely mechanical operation. Undecidability is the condition of im/possibility of decision.”<sup>744</sup> The undecidability of justice, which is neither present nor absent, ‘hovers over the decision, before, during and after’ like a ghost or specter. In virtue of justice being an infinite idea, “infinite because it is irreducible,” and “irreducible because it is owed to the other,” it demands to be made felt in the present – which is at the

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<sup>741</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law”, pg. 251.

<sup>742</sup> Ibid., pg. 252.

<sup>743</sup> Ibid., pg. 253.

<sup>744</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 104.

same time the risk of *injustice*.<sup>745</sup> This is why Derrida insists on the ‘quasi-messianic’ since messianicity as a ‘form’ invokes a Kantian horizon that precisely places a limit on justice. The third aporia is, thus, aptly described as ‘The Urgency That Obstructs the Horizon of Knowledge.’ A decision must be made in “a finite moment of urgency and precipitation.” It has no assurances of any regulative idea of justice and, therefore, “the instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard.”<sup>746</sup>

The pursuit of justice for Derrida does not imply that our desire is fueled by a certain *lack* of the ideal of justice. This kind of positive absolute of justice is precisely what is deconstructed in virtue of its exposure to time. Rather, justice for Derrida, “justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible,”<sup>747</sup> it is undeconstructible. Caputo makes an important remark in response to Hägglund’s ‘abridgement’ of deconstruction referring to the line we have just read from ‘Force of Law’:

he [Derrida] said this not because justice is synonymous with *differance*, which it is not, but because justice is *never* constructed but is rather always *calling for* construction (in laws) and therefore also in the very same voice calling for the deconstruction of any law that is in fact constructed, which is how justice brings its weak force to bear upon the real force of law.<sup>748</sup>

Caputo does say, however, before this passage that there certainly is a sense of the undeconstructible with reference to *differance*, insofar as it is the condition under which any construction takes place. But justice as undeconstructible goes beyond this descriptive sense of deconstruction, that is, the sense in which it mainly describes the instability of law with respect to justice. Justice as undeconstructible is ‘the weak force of a call’ and a ‘promise of an event,’ which is not pure ideal as Hägglund protests, for that would be another condition or description of justice. It is rather, an unconditional-undeconstructible justice, “an unconditional but dangerous demand, a pure promise which cannot be insulated from a pure threat.”<sup>749</sup> If we read the structure of this promise/threat in the context of hospitality, the danger here does not ‘describe’ *merely* the “violent exposure” of what may be knocking at our door, but rather, a ‘hyperbolic ultra-ethical injunction’ which is meant to “actualize our ‘desire’

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<sup>745</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law”, pg. 254.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., pg. 255.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid., pg. 243.

<sup>748</sup> Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion,” pg. 68. See also pg. 123, fn. 135.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., pg. 69.

for unconditional hospitality and to do so ‘in the name of the unconditional.’”<sup>750</sup> The same then is true for law: an undeconstructible ‘idea’ of justice deconstructs law *and* calls us to make laws that are more just, because justice — the ‘very idea’ — does not exist, and because laws do exist.

It should be clear from this reading how Derrida’s deconstruction of law and justice severely problematizes Schmitt’s theory. Schmitt’s logic of the friend-enemy distinction and the sovereign decision to decide allows no space for questioning. If the sovereign indivisible decision were subject to contestation, that is, if the decision by the sovereign was not final and absolute, then there would be no certainty about the enemy. Political ‘killing’ would be indistinguishable from murder, for example. As he writes in *Political Theology* the sovereign decision “frees itself from all normative ties and becomes in the true sense absolute.”<sup>751</sup> If this absolutism is questioned, then the power of the sovereign is divisible and undermined. At stake, for Schmitt, is that questioning is ultimately depoliticizing. For Derrida, Schmitt’s emphasis on decision is not of itself a problem, he does not deny the necessity of decision, but rather that the sovereign decision Schmitt advocates, in fact, is not a decision *as such*. It assumes ‘concrete’ identification or knowledge that leaves the distinction between friend and enemy a matter of programmability. Schmitt would bemoan Derrida’s notion of ‘undecidability’ as a form of political nihilism. But on the contrary, as we have seen Derrida is “confirming — but not by way of deploring the fact, as Schmitt does — an essential and necessary depoliticization.”<sup>752</sup> This depoliticization, Derrida says, is not ‘neuter or negative indifference,’ but through it “one would seek to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy.”<sup>753</sup>

### III. Sovereignty, Autoimmunity, and the Democracy to Come

To conclude this section, we return to Derrida’s *Rogues* essay that presents some of his clearest formulations of sovereignty and a ‘deconstructive politics.’ From what we have already seen, Derrida argues that the antithesis of the political “dwells within the political, and politicizes, the political.”<sup>754</sup> This negative moment of ‘depoliticization,’ contrary to Schmitt, is constitutive of the political as such, and is what Derrida calls the specter of a ‘democracy to come.’<sup>755</sup> While

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<sup>750</sup> Ibid., pg. 76.

<sup>751</sup> Schmitt, *Political Theology*, pg. 12.

<sup>752</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, pg. 104

<sup>753</sup> Ibid.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid., pg. 138.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid., pg. 104.

he also explores this syntagm in *Specters of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship*, the virtue of *Rogues* lies in the fact that the discussion is contextualized directly in relation to (current) challenges faced by democratic politics and sovereignty. The latter is not only a direct reference to Schmitt,<sup>756</sup> but also to the entire ‘ancien régime,’ Caputo says, of “monarchies and aristocracies and oligarchies and the old ontotheologies, all of which rely upon some version of a completely classical schema of God the Father, ‘of the theological idea of sovereignty.’”<sup>757</sup> In the following discussion, then, we explore one of the governing principles in *Rogues*, namely, sovereignty’s *autoimmunity* – the ‘biologistic’ trope that symbolizes the constitutive self-compromise of democracy in order to protect and sustain itself.<sup>758</sup> After demonstrating this ‘auto-immune logic’ with respect to sovereignty and democracy, Derrida concludes his essay with comments similar to those quoted above from *For What Tomorrow....* In these final passages of *Rogues*, he affirms once again the theological filiation between democracy and sovereignty, and suggests whether or not a ‘democracy to come’ might not also be translated to ‘a god to come.’<sup>759</sup>

At this point, Derrida’s comments can be interpreted as offering an alternative to Schmittian political theology. It is suggested that this alternative is what Caputo has cultivated in what we are calling here a ‘radical political theology,’ and which is theologically distinguished by the development of his notions of ‘theopoetics.’ It will be argued that his re-casted version of ‘theopoetics,’ which can be read alongside certain gestures made in Derrida’s final seminar *Sovereignty and the Beast*, potentially articulates a ‘poetic revolution’ of sovereignty all together.

*Rogues* was written in the winter and summer of 2002 in the aftermath of 9/11 and so also predates the anticipation of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this context, Derrida refers to the ‘rogue state’ not only as the nations who are demonized as ‘rogue’ or ‘pariah states’<sup>760</sup> by the U.S., but that it is also belongs to the U.S. itself who employs this rhetoric to mask its own rogue status in its violations of international law and diplomacy. Given our discussion thus far, we can anticipate that Derrida will take this a step further by arguing that this logic of a self-contained foreign nation-state ‘enemy’ no longer functions, or at least not in the way that

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<sup>756</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 141.

<sup>757</sup> John D. Caputo, “Without Sovereignty, Without Being: Unconditionality, The Coming God and Derrida’s Democracy To Come,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.3 (Aug, 2003), pp. 9-26; pp. 10-11.

<sup>758</sup> For helpful commentaries on this concept in Derrida’s thought see, Häggglund’s chapter “The Autoimmunity of Democracy,” in *Radical Atheism*, pp. 164-205; Michael Naas, “One Nation...Indivisible,” in *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 122-146, and Samir Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 54-64.

<sup>759</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 110, 114.

<sup>760</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 69.



it did during the cold war, and indeed, that threats to democracy are less apparent and more nebulous. On the one hand, these threats are more difficult to locate — one thinks about the opacity of terror organizations, or equally, the monolithic yet just as ambiguous ‘trans-state’ or ‘non-state’ actors that characterize global geo-politics and corporate neoliberalism — and on the other, they operate in plain sight, paradigmatically employed by the state itself to ensure its survival: the steps taken to secure democratic principles by the suspension of these very democratic principles<sup>761</sup> — what Derrida calls the ‘suicide of democracy’ or the ‘autoimmune suicide.’<sup>762</sup>

To inquire into the particular quality or rhetorical force of ‘autoimmunity’ one must first consider the value of the *autos* to which it relates. The *autos* and the series of prefixed words it appears alongside all invoke the ‘self-same’ circularity of sovereignty: the *ipse*, the ‘I can’, the property and power (*kratos/cracy*) of the self which belongs to itself and returns to itself, “that gives itself its own law, its force of law, its self-representation, the sovereign and reappropriating gathering of the self in the simultaneity of an assemblage or assembly.”<sup>763</sup> The *autos* of auto-*nomos*, autonomy, and the tradition of democracy from Plato and Aristotle, including the concepts of freedom, equality, the people etc. — all cannot be thought separately from the *autos* or ipseity, as the conjunction of self and sovereignty in the homogeneity of the same circular One.<sup>764</sup> The *autos* as the axiomatic which structures a certain sovereign subjectivity and democracy is anchored in a ‘trope of a theological figure’ (God). Consequently, it remains “incompatible with, even finally clashes with, another truth of the democratic, namely, the truth of the other, heterogeneity, the heteronomic and the dissymmetric, disseminal multiplicity, the anonymous ‘anyone,’ the ‘no matter who,’ the indeterminate ‘each one.’”<sup>765</sup>

Hence, in order for sovereignty ‘to be,’ Derrida agrees it must be an indivisible and unshareable unity, and must occur “as silent as it is instantaneous, without any thickness of

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<sup>761</sup> An example can be seen in Derrida’s native Algeria, where the democratically elected government *temporarily* suspended the democratic voting process when it became clear that a theocratic regime would win a majority and, thus, *permanently* end democracy. The other clear example Derrida has in mind were the measures taken by the U.S. Supreme court to restrict certain democratic freedoms after 9/11 under the pretext of protecting those same democratic freedoms. Ibid, pp. 35; 39-40. Even though these might represent extreme cases, as Derrida has shown elsewhere, the very foundations of democracy itself follow this autoimmune logic. See for example, Derrida’s 1976 essay “Declarations of Independence” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 46-54.

<sup>762</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, pg. 33.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid., pg. 11.

<sup>764</sup> Ibid., pg. 14-15.

<sup>765</sup> Ibid.

time.”<sup>766</sup> However, at this point sovereignty begins to reveal its autoimmunity. In order to maintain itself over time or to distribute itself in space it will necessarily need to justify and defend itself against the other of language and law:

To confer sense or meaning on sovereignty, to justify it, to find a reason for it, is already to compromise its deciding exceptionality, to subject it to rules, to a code of law, to some general law, to concepts. It is thus to divide it...to turn sovereignty against itself, to compromise its immunity. This happens as soon as one speaks of it in order to give it or find in it some sense or meaning. But since this happens all the time, pure sovereignty does not exist; it is always in the process of positing itself by refuting itself, by denying or disavowing itself; it is always in the process of autoimmunizing itself, of betraying itself by betraying the democracy that nonetheless can never do without it.<sup>767</sup>

Sovereignty must be silent but cannot avoid speaking in order to protect itself, and so protects itself precisely by compromising itself. The ‘constitutive autoimmunity’ of sovereignty, therefore, can be expressed as a kind of aporia of deconstruction. It is a ‘double-bind’ that we are now quite familiar with, as indeed, Derrida comments: “I could thus without much difficulty...inscribe the category of the autoimmune into the series of both older and more recent discourses on the *double bind* and the aporia.”<sup>768</sup> If sovereignty suffers its own autoimmunity so does the concept of democracy, which unlike other forms of government, is exemplary for Derrida because it has an “autoimmune necessity inscribed *right onto* [à même] democracy, right onto the concept of a democracy without concept, a democracy devoid of sameness and ipseity.”<sup>769</sup> One of the ways that Derrida consolidates this necessary autoimmunity is to approach the perennial problem of the democratic tradition, namely, the relation between freedom and equality. The basic paradox in democracy is that ‘the people’ (*demos*) are free to act (*kratos*) how they want, while at the same time this action must be sanctioned by this ‘people.’ Consequently, there is a necessary limit placed on freedom in order to constitute a plurality of ‘the people’ — that is, by those who share in the equality of this freedom. To be a free people is to be equal, and this requires the placing of a limit on being free. Derrida then introduces measurability to describe this aporia, aligning equality with the

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<sup>766</sup> Ibid., pg. 10.

<sup>767</sup> Ibid., pg. 101.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid., pg. 35.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

calculable homogeneity of a unit or group, and freedom with the incalculable heterogeneous power to act.<sup>770</sup> As is always the case with this aporetic structure, it is not that one takes preference over the other, but rather that both contradictory positions mutually compromise each other and are necessary for the constitution of democracy. Given this “semantic abyss”<sup>771</sup> of democracy, Derrida can claim that:

There is no absolute paradigm, whether constitutive or constitutional, no absolutely intelligible idea, no *eidos*, no *idea* of democracy. And so, in the final analysis, no democratic ideal. For, even if there were one, and wherever there would be one, this ‘there is’ would remain aporetic, under a double or autoimmune constraint.<sup>772</sup>

The crucial point about the ‘autoimmune constraint’ inherent to the ‘idea’ of democracy is not that the undecidable practices of democracy (emphasizing either freedom or equality) do not attain the ‘perfect’ ideal or equilibrium, but rather that without this autoimmunity these practices don’t ‘get going.’ Autoimmunity is the condition of im/possibility for either more inclusive notions of equality (the *demos*) and the exercise of freedoms/rights (*cracy*), or the reverse, the unequal distribution of power to the few and the restriction of rights or freedoms. Derrida’s futural democracy ‘to come’ oscillates between a “hyperbolic essence”<sup>773</sup> of ‘perfectibility’ and an “autoimmune pervertibility,”<sup>774</sup> a “nondialectizable antimony that risks paralyzing and thus calls for the event of the interruptive decision.”<sup>775</sup> The autoimmunity of democracy ‘is’ the democracy ‘to come,’ in the sense that it remains revisable and always open to change, and yet, because this change is always ‘to come’ (unforeseeable, undecidable, incalculable), it is always a “perilous transaction” which “must thus invent, each time, in a singular situation, its own law and norm, that is, a maxim that welcomes each time the event to come.”<sup>776</sup> As Michael Naas comments further:

Autoimmunity is the very condition of the unconditionality of the event; it is what opens the *autos*, what opens *us*, to time, space, language, and the other. Without autoimmunity, without some compromise in the forces of identity that form and sustain — that *seem* to form and sustain — the *autos*,

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<sup>770</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid., pg. 72.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid., pg. 37.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid., pg. 41.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid., pg. 34.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid., pg. 35.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., pg. 150-151.

there would be no relation to anything beyond the self. And since the self cannot return to itself and thus be itself without this openness, without some alterity, autoimmunity — like deconstruction — is the case.<sup>777</sup>

In the section following this passage, Naas makes two important points about autoimmunity that should be highlighted before our discussion returns to Caputo. First, he says that the advantage of autoimmunity as a deconstructive trope is that it can be understood “as What Happens,” as opposed to the often-cited misunderstandings of deconstruction as a ‘method’ to be ‘applied.’ For Derrida, deconstruction is always underway in texts and discourses, and with autoimmunity it becomes clear that this is also ‘what happens’ to institutions, nations, sovereignty etc. — “in every *autos* that tries to maintain its sovereignty...by immunizing itself against the other.”<sup>778</sup> “Hence,” Naas continues, “autoimmunity is not *opposed* to immunity but is, as it were, secreted by it, it is a self-destructive ‘force’ produced by the immunizing gesture itself, a weak force that undoes the force or power of sovereignty.”<sup>779</sup> Secondly, following from this ‘natural’ gesture (secretion) of autoimmunity as that which ‘happens,’ Naas suggests further that Derrida’s use of this theme from the ‘life sciences’ is far from a clever Derridianism, but rather allows him to “rethink the notion of *physis*...and the notion of *life*,” and that “[t]he generalization and reinscription of autoimmunity allows him to pose questions of nature and life otherwise.”<sup>780</sup>

This emphasis on the ‘material’ or ‘natural’ thematic in Derrida’s thought was not new to *Rogues*. As Samir Haddad has illustrated, its first substantial appearance was made in “Faith and Knowledge” (1994)<sup>781</sup> and, thus, coincides with the general political and religious tones of Derrida’s later writing. In “Faith and Knowledge” the figure of autoimmunity was used to describe how attempts to indemnify faith or religion against knowledge or science would lead to the necessary supplements of knowledge or science to faith or religion, and at the same time that an originary faith was always at work in all knowledge or science. Again, following Naas, and important for us here, is the contention that it was no coincidence that Derrida would develop this biological figure in the context of a discourse on religion, for it is in such a context that *life* itself is at stake. The notion of autoimmunity in “Faith and Knowledge” Naas says,

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<sup>777</sup> Nass, *Derrida From Now On*, pg. 139.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid., pg. 140.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid., pg. 141.

<sup>781</sup> Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy*, pg. 54-65. See also Haddad’s “Reading Derrida Reading Derrida: Deconstruction as Self-Inheritance,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 14.4 (2006), pp. 505-520, as well as Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, pp. 128-132.

“gets deployed in a text on *life*, on living on and salvation, on religion’s sacrifice of life for something greater than life, and thus on the spectral, phantasmatic character of sovereignty and spectralizing messianicity that interrupts that phantasm.”<sup>782</sup> The ordeal of the autoimmune in the sense that the body must compromise its immunity in order for it not to reject a newly grafted organ, for example, is a perilous opening of the body/self/democracy, but precisely to ensure its survival, that is, to give it a chance at life. This will be important to bear in mind when it is argued below that radical theology’s theopoetics does not ignore, but is in fact deeply concerned for the material political conditions of present-day life.

In a final rogue-ish move at the end of the first essay in *Rogues*, Derrida makes a remarkable and dramatic reflection after these investigations into autoimmunity, democracy, and sovereignty. He states that “in preparing for this lecture, I often asked myself whether everything that seems to link the democracy to come to the specter...might not lead back or be reducible to some unavowed theologism.” He goes on to say that he does not mean the figures of sovereignty in the western canon (the Abrahamic God, monarchy, or the ‘people of gods’ in democracy), but rather “on account of the to-come, I asked myself whether this did not resemble what someone in whom we have never suspected the slightest hint of democratism said one day of the god who alone could still save us.” Heidegger’s infamous comments from the *Der Spiegel* interview to which Derrida is referring, are interpreted here as a spectral ‘god to come,’ and for the very specific reason that ultimately, for Derrida, it is God the sovereign which remains the anchor of all sovereignty. What remains to be thought, then, is this ‘god to come.’ A God *without* sovereignty as an unconditional event. A God ‘to-come,’ who is expressed not by the logic of the *autos* but by a ‘poetics of the call.’ A God ‘to-come’ who would no longer serve a Schmittian political theology but would rather be in service of a ‘radical political theology.’ A radical political theology around a sovereignty *without* sovereignty, which would not defer the political but reaffirm it in all its materiality and cosmic weight. It is, therefore, unsurprising that all of Derrida’s last works after *Rogues* would reflect on these themes: materiality/animality and the political-theological specter of sovereignty.<sup>783</sup>

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<sup>782</sup> Naas, *Derrida From Now On*, pg. 131.

<sup>783</sup> In addition to *The Beast and the Sovereign* volumes we have already mentioned, see also Jacques Derrida, David Wills (trans.) and Marie-Louise Mallet (ed.) *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, Marc Crépon and Thomas Dutoit (eds.) and Peggy Kamuf (trans.) *The Death Penalty: Volume I* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014) and Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington and Marc Crépon (eds.) and Elizabeth Rottenberg (trans.) *The Death Penalty Volume II* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017).

### III. Theological Materialisms: Badiou, Agamben, Žižek

If we are to defend the claim that Caputo's religious reading of Derrida — and a radical political theology of the event or the 'event of sovereignty,' which is articulated through the discursive resources of a 'theopoetics' — offers a sufficient hermeneutical account of 'the material,' neither collapsing into a concealed desire for concretization in the present, nor denigrating the present at the expense of what is 'to come,' then it will be necessary for us to distinguish Derrida and Caputo's position from other attempts to 'materialize' the event. Perhaps the three figures who have most vigorously taken up the task of this materialist turn in continental philosophy are Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben. United in their abhorrence of capitalism as well as outspoken anti-Liberal posture, they are critical of and reproach thinkers like Derrida for being tied to an anti-essentialist rhetoric whose future never actually 'breaks into' the particularity of history. For them, Derrida's 'democracy to come' only reinstates the logic of capitalism, and so as Žižek has famously quipped, 'democracy is not to come, but to go.'<sup>784</sup> Given the scope of their respective corpora, the vast secondary literature concerned with their work, and the distinctiveness of each of their approaches, we limit our discussion by following a critical reading presented by Jayne Svenungsson, which accords with the position we are developing here. To remind the reader, the critical discussion below is not presented as a final word on these thinkers' positions, but rather is being used to distinguish and clarify Caputo's religious reading of Derrida.

Svenungsson's recently translated monograph *Divining History* (2016),<sup>785</sup> inspired by Karl Löwith's classic study, *Meaning in History* (1949), explores the ways in which Jewish and Christian conceptions of history have influenced the development of modern political thought.<sup>786</sup> Examining the themese of prophetism, messianism and spirit, deployed in five historical epochs — viz. the biblical-textual tradition, medieval theology, German Romanticism, twentieth century ideology critique and current twenty-first century political-philosophical radicalism — Svenungsson argues for the enduring, albeit complex, value of this biblical legacy. In contrast to modern political theology (Schmitt), she explores a 'theopolitical'

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<sup>784</sup> Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, Creston Davis (ed.) *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), pg. 255.

<sup>785</sup> Jayne Svenungsson, Stephen Donovan (trans.) *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism, and the Development of Spirit* (New York: Berghahn, 2016)

<sup>786</sup> Svenungsson holds the chair of Systematic Theology at Lund University in Sweden. Apart from this recent monograph she has also co-edited a number of important volumes, including Elani Namali, Jayne Svenungsson and Alana M. Vincent (eds.) *Jewish Thought, Utopia, and Revolution* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014) and an important volume on Martin Heidegger, see Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson (eds.) *Heidegger's Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).



understanding of *prophetic* justice which refuses reduction into the present political order. Similarly, she reads the *messianic* as a 'restorative' figure opposed to an 'apocalyptic' one, where justice is understood as an ongoing task rather than an 'irruption' into the present, and finally she opts for a Derridian 'spectral' and 'haunting' understanding of *spirit*, contrasted to many of the 'coercive dialectical schemas' of the twentieth century.<sup>787</sup> In her final chapter she takes up a critical assessment of Badiou, Žižek and Agamben, illustrating their own distinctive applications of these motifs. A significant part of this assessment resides in the 'decisionist elements' she discerns in parts of their thinking, and therefore a 'neo-Schmittian' alliance with a number of theological concepts (grace rather than law, spirit rather than letter etc.), which lead to the revival of certain apocalyptic, antinomian and authoritarian qualities. By distinguishing her own (and Derrida's) position from these tendencies, she makes a compelling case for the continued, yet qualified, importance of the historico-theological tradition for contemporary political and philosophical debates. We turn now to briefly consider Svenungsson's handling of these thinkers, respectively.

## I. Alain Badiou

Alain Badiou's hugely influential neo-Marxist philosophy of event is set in the context of the depoliticizing cultural logic of late capitalism. Capitalism and cultural relativism go hand-in-hand for Badiou; the multiculturalism of present day democracy allows the former to encourage the proliferation of identity in order to commodify and profit off it, while the latter welcomes capital in support of its struggle for recognition. A recent example of this can be seen in the Nike advertising campaign that decided to support the American football player, Colin Kaepernick. In order to boost sales, Nike endorsed Kaepernick's protest against racial discrimination in the National Football League, thereby appearing as champions 'for minority groups,' when of course, giant brands like Nike themselves are a part of the very machine which creates the economic conditions that disenfranchise these minorities.<sup>788</sup> This exploitation occurs for any perceived minority for Badiou: "For every new identity there is a special magazine, for every new oppressed group a new 'free' radio station – in short, for every new subculture a new body of consumers."<sup>789</sup>

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<sup>787</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. xiii.

<sup>788</sup> Marc Bain, "Nike's Kaepernick ad is what happens when capitalism and activism collide," *Quartz*. 29 September 2018. Accessed: 1 October 2018. <https://qz.com/1400583/modern-corporate-social-activism-looks-like-nikes-kaepernick-ad/>

<sup>789</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 154.

Although not the first intervention (considering Jacob Taubes' posthumously published study on the apostle Paul which had already appeared in 1993)<sup>790</sup> Badiou's contribution to the unexpected 'turn to Paul' appeared both innovative and persuasive. In *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997),<sup>791</sup> Badiou, an avowed atheist with no interest in the religious value of Paul whatsoever, finds the perfect 'revolutionary prototype' capable of breaking out of the deadlock of contemporary politics. Paul's significance lies in his articulation of a 'universal singularity': a proclamation of truth (the risen Christ) available to all individual subjects, but without the predicate of this or that community (neither Jew nor Gentile, master or slave, male or female). On the one hand, a subject's new identity which is now expressed in 'fidelity' to this revolutionary event marks a radical break with the legal and economic abstractions of capitalism (for Paul, the Roman Empire), and on the other hand, undermines restrictive identity groupings (Jewish priority based on revealed law) in the assumption of a more universal identity (to be a 'Christian').

For Svenungsson, Badiou's reading of Paul relies on a certain apocalyptic reading of the messianic event, reanimating "an implicit anti-Jewish dialectic that counterposes law to grace."<sup>792</sup> Despite the fact that historical scholarship has for a long while dismissed the claim that Paul's radicalism is motivated by a desire to shed his Jewish faith, Badiou is nonetheless committed to construing the law not as an extension of grace, but as a prevention of the messianic event.<sup>793</sup> For Badiou, the details of these historical debates are not his concern and, thus, the messianic theme in his reading of Paul is to be understood as symptomatic of the broader goals and patterns within his philosophy.

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<sup>790</sup> Jacob Taubes, Dana Hollander (trans.), Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (eds.) *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). This work also gave particular inspiration to Agamben's commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, first published in Italian in 2000. See Giorgio Agamben, Patricia Dailey (trans.), *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Another important component to this resurgence of interest in Paul, was also given by Heidegger's early 1920s lectures on the phenomenology of religious life published in 1995 in the sixtieth volume of the *Gesamtausgabe*. See Svenungsson's introductory essay on the philosophical and theological significance of Heidegger's early interest in Paul: "Introduction: Heidegger and Theology after the Black Notebooks" in Jayne Svenungsson and Mårten Björk (eds.) *Heidegger's Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 1-22.

<sup>791</sup> Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier (trans.) *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). For a condensed outline of Badiou's approach to Paul, see Alain Badiou, "St. Paul Founder of the Universal Subject" in John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff (eds.) *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 27-38.

<sup>792</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 157.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-157.

In his magnum opus, *Being and Event* (1988),<sup>794</sup> Badiou invokes set theory to define the multiplicity of singularities which constitute being. These singularities are often grouped together in the ‘state of the situation.’ The ‘event’ for Badiou is that which breaks the structure of the situation to reveal ‘the truth of the situation.’ While the event is strictly a ‘happening’ of truth (the ‘truth event’) which is disruptive to the present order, it still requires the subject (understood here not as an ‘individual’ but as the political collective, ‘the people’) to recognize this truth and to commit to it in fidelity. While the political tone of Badiou’s work unmistakably aligns with a revolutionary praxis aimed at a ‘true’ politics beyond the State, it would be a caricature to conclude that this discloses a simple return to Marxism.<sup>795</sup> As Svenungsson points out, Badiou stays clear of dialectical materialism and the idea of the political being grounded on a rational or philosophical basis. Rather, “politics is about events that take place without originating in existing structures.” A true politics requires a subject and a corresponding truth-event, which is “an act by which a people declares itself a political subject and remains faithful to that declaration.”<sup>796</sup>

Badiou’s fascination with rupture and irruption, his frequent use of terms like ‘terror,’ ‘discipline,’ and ‘grace’ – in short, the revolutionary event that reconfigures the coordinates of the system – leads according to Svenungsson, to a paradoxical neglect of the material in the ‘situated’ ethics he supposedly defends. Simon Critchley describes the context for this neglect of material conditions with reference to a kind of ‘formalism’ in his philosophy. That is, the event requires a situation (an ‘evental site’), but it does not ‘belong’ to the situation. The material conditions for politics are elided because they are not a sufficient condition for the event.<sup>797</sup> The structure of Pauline messianism that Badiou advocates in the proclamation of Christ is unable to reconcile the fact that this event “is deeply rooted in the stories, traditions and divine promises which characterized Hellenistic Judaism.”<sup>798</sup>

Invoking the critiques of Eric Marty and Daniel Bensaïd (and we can also add Critchley to this list), Svenungsson concludes that Badiou reduces politics to the spectacular voluntarist moment of the subject, where all mediating political concerns are denounced as mundane and

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<sup>794</sup> Alain Badiou, Oliver Feltham (trans.) *Being and Event* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). For an accessible introduction to Badiou’s thought see his book interview with Fabian Tarby and Louise Burchill (trans.) *Philosophy and the Event* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>795</sup> On this point, Simon Critchley has argued that Badiou should be read as a Rousseauist rather than ‘Second International’ Marxism or Leninism, owing much to the influence of his teacher Louis Althusser. See Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, pp. 26-27; 93-102.

<sup>796</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 160.

<sup>797</sup> Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, pg. 96.

<sup>798</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 161.

profane. At this point, the decisionistic element becomes apparent, as Badiou is lead ineluctably back to theology: “its jumble of graces, miracles, revelations, repentances, and pardons.”<sup>799</sup> In a somewhat ironic gesture then, Badiou, hailed for his defense of communism, fails the Marxist tradition by departing from it in a most fundamental respect: “where Marx united the dream of messianic justice with a deep respect for the complexity of material reality, Badiou has nowhere succeeded in connecting messianism and materialism; event and history; the moment of revolt and the practice that ensures the permanence of peace.”<sup>800</sup> By contrast — and this is a part of Badiou’s problem, especially when seen in light of his controversial talk about the predicate “Jew” — in deriding philosophies of difference and conceiving them in substantialist terms, Badiou confuses particularism with a genuine sense of social-differential relations, which thinkers like Derrida are especially sensitive to. In short, Badiou’s materialist messianism forgets the material and “bodies disappear” in his ‘idealistic historiography.’<sup>801</sup>

## II. Giorgio Agamben

If Badiou’s philosophy ends up negligent toward the material, then Giorgio Agamben is perhaps the philosopher associated with the ‘turn to Paul’ who has most occupied himself with matter and bodies, as evinced in the title of his famous *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995).<sup>802</sup> In his contribution to this new Pauline ‘moment,’<sup>803</sup> *The Time That Remains*,<sup>804</sup> Agamben is also concerned with the radicality of Paul’s proclamation. Together with Badiou he is interested in the space created by the suspension of law where there is no longer Greek or Jew. But for Agamben, the significance of this suspension does not offer an abstract universal identity like that suggested by Badiou, but rather, a more complex picture of identity that is *transformed by* being inscribed into a new distinction, namely, between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit.’<sup>805</sup> Paul’s emphasis on being called (*vocatio*) to new life in the ‘spirit’ does not dissolve difference but radicalizes it, demonstrating that identity is always contingent. This claim, which would be much closer to Derrida, indicates that the essentialization of difference (the excess of identity politics), would itself deconstruct precisely in virtue of difference. “In a

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<sup>799</sup> Ibid., pg. 164, Svenungsson is quoting Bensaïd.

<sup>800</sup> Ibid., pg. 164.

<sup>801</sup> Ibid., pp. 162-163.

<sup>802</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Daniel Heller-Roazen (trans.) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>803</sup> See John Milbank, Creston Davis, Slavoj Žižek and Catherine Pickstock, *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

<sup>804</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Patricia Dailey (trans.) *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>805</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 170.

nutshell,” Svenungsson concludes, “a good analysis of social and racial oppression” for Agamben, “needs *more* difference, not less”<sup>806</sup> — unlike Badiou, in the manner in which he treats anti-Semitism, for example.<sup>807</sup>

Agamben’s difference with Badiou really comes to the fore, however, in his reading of messianic time, and also distinguishes itself from Derrida’s reading in the ‘Force of Law’ essay. Agamben avoids the apocalyptic sense of the messianic that Badiou identifies in Paul, and instead understands ‘the time that remains’ through a Benjaminian lens. This understanding of time does not view the expectation of the Messiah’s return in the ‘vulgarity’ of chronological time, but rather, in a way quite similar to Derrida, considers it as another modality of time that transforms from within. However, as Svenungsson rightly points out, Agamben presents this argument along a line that re-establishes a polarization between law and grace.

Recalling Schmitt for a moment, with whom Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ is in conversation, Schmitt attempted in *Political Theology* to locate the state of exception within the juridical order. This paradox of ‘lawless violence’ or ‘mythic violence’ where the boundary between law and violence becomes indistinguishable, is symptomatic of what Agamben famously asserted in his analysis of Schmitt, namely, that the state of exception now “tends to increasingly appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics.”<sup>808</sup> In his polemic with Schmitt, Benjamin’s response to this tendency results in repeated returns to the messianic notion of ‘divine’ or ‘pure revolutionary violence,’<sup>809</sup> residing outside of the law precisely in order to abolish it. This challenge to law, for Agamben, is not understood as a move toward anarchy or ‘lawlessness’ but rather to ‘another use of law’ — a ‘higher justice.’<sup>810</sup> And it is here that Agamben identifies Paul as a prototypical figure, because Paul sees that the only way to escape the predicament of law and sin (Rom. 7:7-8) is through Christ, who calls us not abolish the moral life (law of works) but to a higher law, the ‘law of faith’ (grace).

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<sup>806</sup> Ibid., pg. 171.

<sup>807</sup> See Alain Badiou, Steve Corcoran (trans.) “Uses of the Word Jew” in *Polemics* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 155-254.

<sup>808</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Kevin Attell (trans.) *State of Exception* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), pg. 2; pp. 11-22.

<sup>809</sup> For example, in ‘Critique of Violence’ published in 1921, Benjamin writes, “But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means.” See Walter Benjamin, Edmund Jephcott (trans.) “Critique of Violence” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 277-300; pg. 300. And later in his Theses on history, he refers to the task of bringing about a more radical ‘state of exception’, a “real state of emergency” in order to “improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.” See Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn (trans.) “Theses On The Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pg. 257.

<sup>810</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 175.

Svenungsson admits that Agamben does present a complex picture of Paul's relationship with the law, but his reading "nonetheless results in a polarizing schema in which law – in the sense of regulations, decrees and acts – is counterposed to a general promise of justice that lies hidden within law itself. Ultimately, the true purpose of the law seems to be to dissolve itself in its positive form."<sup>811</sup>

This approach to law has been confirmed by Simon Critchley in what he calls a 'crypto-Marcionism' in contemporary readings of Paul.<sup>812</sup> He specifically identifies Agamben and Badiou (as well as Heidegger) as a part of this 'ultra-Paulinism.' For Critchley, Agamben's flirtations with the antinomian elements of Paul serve only to radicalize the 'distinction between law and life,' where the latter must be identified with the 'Messianic order of redemption.'<sup>813</sup> But for Critchley, and therefore in agreement with Svenungsson, this in fact is Maricionism and not Paul.<sup>814</sup> For Agamben following Benjamin, the zealous quest for 'purity' outside the law ('pure' right, 'pure' language and 'pure' violence)<sup>815</sup> leaves neither the space for law to be constituted as a good in *itself*, nor even for a consideration of the progressive legal-judicial developments that have taken place in the twentieth century.<sup>816</sup> This is why in Svenungsson's analysis, which accords with our own discussion above, Derrida's reading in 'Force of Law' is preferable. As in the first part of 'Force of Law' where there is a structural undecidability between law and justice, and thus no 'pure' realm of justice, in the second part, which deals with Benjamin, there can be no 'pure divine' violence beyond the implied violence of founding and preservation of law. To use Benjamin's language, Derrida would say that we cannot ultimately distinguish between 'mythic' and 'divine' violence.<sup>817</sup>

### III. Slavoj Žižek

Both Badiou and Agamben's philosophical approaches converge in a bipartite view of the messianic: a suspension of the law to make way for universalism and a higher law beyond law. For the last figure in Svenungsson's analysis, Slavoj Žižek, what both these thinkers fail

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<sup>811</sup> Ibid., pg. 176.

<sup>812</sup> Critchley, *Faith of the faithless*, pp. 195-202.

<sup>813</sup> Ibid., pg. 200.

<sup>814</sup> For Critchley, the law is essential to faith for Paul, for without it there would be no knowledge of sin, and therefore freedom would mean nothing. Ibid., pp. 203-206.

<sup>815</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, pg. 88: "We will have then before us a 'pure' right, in the sense in which Benjamin speaks of a 'pure' language and a 'pure' violence. To a word that does not bind, that neither commands nor prohibits anything, but says only itself, would correspond an action as pure means, which shows only itself, without any relation to an end."

<sup>816</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 177.

<sup>817</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law", pp. 258-298.



to notice is that their respective schemes (law vs. event which inaugurates the universal in Badiou and law vs. a 'pure' revolutionary violence in Agamben) do not ultimately break free from the binding of law. Invoking Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek reproaches Badiou for having missed Lacan's point, "that what is illusory is the very belief that we can shake off the law by simply suspending it."<sup>818</sup> The break with law that Badiou reads in Paul is in fact the 'law of the break with law.' This relation to law, which is conceived once again as a hindrance to a true universalism, is also assigned to Agamben, who for Žižek has internalized the 'higher law' of grace (the Lacanian 'big Other') into the "hyperbolic law of the superego."<sup>819</sup> The true universalism of Paul (Žižek wants to preserve this thought from Badiou) is only possible for Žižek when not only is the law suspended (Badiou) or counterposed to grace (Agamben), but *also* when the hyperbolic law of the superego, which both these positions represent, is itself rejected or negated. In short, a radical break with law requires another break, a double negation that is accomplished through Žižek's dialectical-Hegelian reading of Christianity.<sup>820</sup>

Žižek's 'Hegelian trope' reveals a movement away from the messianic (the anti-dialectic) seen in Badiou and Agamben, to the pneumatic or spirit: from a bipartite to a tripartite structure that is only preserved in the 'perverse core' of Christianity. God the transcendent Father becomes alienated from himself in Christ's abandonment (the elimination of the 'big Other'), followed by our alienation from God in Christ's death (there is no 'saving grace', higher law, or hyperbolic superego). Father is sublimated into the Son, who is sublimated into Spirit.<sup>821</sup> In response to what would be an immediate objection, that this Spirit is the Absolute in which all reality is grounded, Žižek argues that the more radical implication of the double negation is that the Spirit takes up its place precisely as an expression not of infinite being but of finite human existence, what he calls the 'fighting collective.'<sup>822</sup>

<sup>818</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 180. For Žižek's reading of Badiou see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 127-170; especially his disagreement with him over Lacan, pp. 162-167.

<sup>819</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 181.

<sup>820</sup> Žižek elaborates his reading in a number of texts. See for example Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and The Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003); Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity" in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, Creston Davis (ed.) *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 24-109; Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or, Why is the Christian Legacy worth fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000). For a concise introduction to Žižek's thought with respect to Christianity, see Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

<sup>821</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 182.

<sup>822</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pg. 130. We should note here the convergence of Caputo's position with that of Žižek's notion of the fighting collective. The important difference is that even if the fighting collective (Spirit) is conceived as a *virtuality* with its status as a subjective presupposition, that is, a subjectivity in which we recognize ourselves but as a fiction, then Caputo would argue that these subjective presuppositions are themselves responses to the event. The problem with Žižek's *virtuality*, for Caputo, is that it is "too much taken with subjective events." Echoing Svenungsson deep concern, Caputo writes, "The event is not the decisiveness of the decision, but the insistence of what calls for existence in a decision, which is the decision of the other in me." See Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pg. 144; pp. 136-164. See also John D. Caputo, "The Perversity of the Absolute, the Perverse Core of Hegel, and the

Despite distancing himself from the “stereotyping formula that connects Judaism with reactionary particularism (the law) and Christianity with emancipatory universalism (grace),”<sup>823</sup> Žižek is still adamant that Judaism is ultimately unable to enact the double negation. He develops a nuanced account of diaspora Judaism where he argues the universal impulse is already anticipated, but it is only Christianity that this is later fulfilled. The more pressing issue for Žižek lies in the fact that Judaism does not expose the ‘ghost’ of its silent God; the Jewish people remain silent and faithful adherents to an impotent God as their source of vitality in the diaspora. But this means the Jewish people always remain a closed community. Pauline Christianity, on the contrary, reveals that the true ‘child of Abraham’ is the Christian.<sup>824</sup> It is through Christ’s death that the ghost is revealed — God is alienated not only from us, but also from himself — and thus constitutes a new identity, a new community of ‘chosen people.’

What concerns Svenungsson and others is an emerging vision of Christian superiority and supersessionism that becomes apparent in Žižek’s critique of Judaism and defensive bulwark of the Christian legacy.<sup>825</sup> Žižek’s attempt to locate his radical universalism in the excluded ‘Remainder,’ echoing Badiou’s ‘universal singularity,’ also fails for Svenungsson because this ‘remainder’ is an ‘empty figure.’ She makes this argument by observing that for Žižek, as well as his recent collaborator John Milbank, the truths of their respective versions of the Christian legacy (dialectical materialism and theological realism) are more important than the recognition that Christian truth inevitably takes on different meanings in different contexts. What this means for Svenungsson’s reading of Žižek is that he has reduced Christianity — or for him its political significance (the source of an emancipatory universalist project located in

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Possibility of Radical Theology” in Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis (eds.) *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion Politics and Dialectic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 47-66; pp. 56-58. And also, Katherine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015) where she clarifies the similarities and differences between Caputo and Žižek. See pp. 67-75 for Žižek’s misreading of Caputo and pp. 79-82 for their differences.

<sup>823</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 183.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid. Svenungsson references Žižek’s contrast of Job and Christ in their respective encounters with the silent God. The difference between them is that in the story of Job, the alienated relationship with God is finally accepted (there is no ‘big Other’), while for the crucified Christ, the son of God not only accepts God’s silence, but in his death alienates God from himself. There is neither the ‘big Other’, nor the ‘spectral narrative’ of God’s impotence that the Jewish community secretly remains faithful to. Christianity exposes this secret. Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pg. 127. See also Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology*, pp. 88-96, where he traces the development of Žižek’s thinking of Judaism.

<sup>825</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pp. 184-186. See also, Ola Sigurdson, *Theology and Marxism in Eagleton and Žižek: A Conspiracy of Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 104-107. It is also in light of this saving of the Christian legacy, as the *only* way in which to counter the sinister logic of capitalism and secular modernity, that the unexpected alliance Žižek’s dialectical materialism and the theological realism of Radical Orthodoxy is to be understood. This encounter can be followed in Creston Davis (ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

that which has been excluded from this universality) — to a principal that ignores the very subjects of ‘the Remainder.’ Svenungsson resolves by concluding:

Had he [Žižek] instead taken an interest in the real subjects of ‘the Remainder’ — people of differing cultural backgrounds with potentially conflicting ideological, political and religious conceptions of freedom and justice — he would have been forced to concede the complexity and nuance that necessarily characterizes any responsible discussion of universal emancipation.<sup>826</sup>

In a similar way to Badiou, then, Žižek’s dialectical materialism ends up eliding the very material it purports to emancipate. He “may be full of revolutionary pathos,” Svenungsson notes, “but disappointment awaits any reader of Žižek’s writings looking for substantial reflection upon the concrete conditions of possibility for the revolutionary project.”<sup>827</sup> Mediations of this kind are doomed to fail, as he argues in his polemic with Simon Critchley, because the revolutionary event occurs in an ‘absolute present.’ The absolute present is not the pseudo-activity of reactive liberal politics, but something more like Benjaminian ‘divine violence’.<sup>828</sup> But as Critchley argues, Žižek wants to have his cake and eat too. On the one hand, the lack of concrete (material) interventions in Žižek’s philosophy — what he calls ‘subtractive politics’ — are due to his conviction that any such interventions are immediately locked into ideological fantasy and, thus, we are to be like Melville’s passive Bartleby — do nothing, ‘I would prefer not to.’<sup>829</sup> On the other hand, we must dream of divine violence, “a cataclysmic, purifying violence of the sovereign ethical deed.”<sup>830</sup> Hence, with a teasing tone, Critchley writes, “For Žižek is, I think, a Slovenian Hamlet: utterly paralyzed but dreaming of an avenging act for which, finally, he lacks the courage.”<sup>831</sup>

Svenungsson’s analysis of Žižek concludes by re-emphasizing the tripartite Hegelian structure that governs the ‘spirit’ motif in the background of his work. This motif, which does not represent a higher *Aufhebung*, is rather the tension between the passivity of the ‘not to do’ and the ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’ — a vision of politics not outside of the State (Badiou and Agamben) but one that recaptures it. As mentioned, this revolutionary violence

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<sup>826</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 187.

<sup>827</sup> Ibid.

<sup>828</sup> Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, pp. 210-213.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid., pg. 212.

<sup>830</sup> Ibid.

<sup>831</sup> Ibid., pp. 212-213.

is supposed to be articulated from 'the Remainder,' with the precondition that it renders invisible the very subjects it represents in order guarantee its universal potential. With this conclusion, Svenungsson brings together what worries her about all three of these figures, namely, that in their effort to break with contemporary liberal and day-to-day democratic politics they end up concealing a desire for 'pure violence', 'the moment' and 'decision'. Referring to Karl Löwith's essay published in 1935, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," Svenungsson identifies a structural parallel with these thinkers and Schmitt's 'decision.' While with differing political goals in mind, these thinkers are all united in resisting stultifying politics and, thus, along with Schmitt do not attribute any "progressive force to existing judicial and political structures."<sup>832</sup> And so Schmitt's political theology re-emerges as evidenced by the expressly theological language these thinkers deploy: we might say a quasi-renaissance of the 'politics of presence,' or a "quasi-theologically legitimated worship of the present and the moment."<sup>833</sup> The question this study is pressing to answer is whether one can move beyond this Schmittian political theology? And if so, what would such a 'beyond' look like or entail? The thesis being pursued here is that Caputo's theopoetics constitutes the discursive site of a radical political theology that circumvents these extra-theological forces.

#### IV. The Theopoetics Of Radical Political Theology

In the first section of this chapter we discussed Derrida's proximity to Carl Schmitt and elaborated his deconstruction of sovereignty. That analysis concluded with the dream or promise of a sovereignty *without* sovereignty as a condition of a 'god to come' and thus a 'radical political theology.' The latter entailed the consideration that Derrida's later work began to point toward a growing emphasis on the political and 'the material,' as seen in his notion of 'autoimmunity.' This concern, which would underpin a radical political theology, raised the question of other broadly (quasi) theological attempts to 'materialize' the event in contemporary philosophy. Through a reading of Badiou, Agamben and Žižek, assisted predominantly by the analysis of Jayne Svenungsson, Schmitt's shadow was shown to be cast over their respective projects in their effort to break with the chronic ossification of liberal democratic politics. In various ways, they disclose a 'desire for presence' through authoritarian and exclusivist gestures, which not only jeopardizes the successes of progressive democratic political-legal reform but also at the expense of the particular or material.

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<sup>832</sup> Svenungsson, *Divining History*, pg. 193.

<sup>833</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 195.

If these thinkers chastise Derrida and ‘postmodern thought’ as forever entrapped in deferral of the ‘democracy to come,’ then their own solutions combined with the rejection of democracy *as such*, don’t elicit much confidence. Their theological materialism, in this sense, is not material enough, for it cares very little for the particularities that democracy aims to protect. The question can now be asked, whether John Caputo’s radical theology offers a less hostile alternative to the injustices that democracy does indeed continue to perpetuate, and furthermore, if this alternative does not also lapse into a neglect for the material. In what follows, it is argued that Caputo’s later radical theology *does*, or at least makes significant steps *toward*, accomplishing this goal through his re-worked or re-casted notion of theopoetics.

The basic argument is that Caputo’s later work evinces a ‘turn to the material’ or what Katherine Moody has called, Caputo’s ‘hyper-realist materialism.’<sup>834</sup> This turn is not so much a revision of his early theological production but rather a reformulation that seeks to reemphasize a radical theology deeply invested in particular empirical reality all the while not lapsing into empiricism. The key conceptual development in this ‘turn’ is the pre-methodological hermeneutics of theopoetics. If theopoetics forms the hermeneutical reference point for Caputo’s radical theology, then it is via this hermeneutic that we can return to the notion of sovereignty. As will be argued, a re-casted theopoetics, which receives further elaboration in *The Insistence of God*, renders the possibility of what Derrida calls a ‘poetic revolution’ of sovereignty — an ‘event of sovereignty’ — and therefore inaugurates a ‘political-poetic revolution,’ which finally points us toward a truly ‘radical political theology.’

### I. The ‘Poetics’ of Theo-poetics

Behind Caputo’s ‘weak’ theology in *Weakness of God* is what he calls a ‘theo-poetics of the event’<sup>835</sup> or a ‘poetics of the impossible.’<sup>836</sup> Theo-poetics is the attempt to ‘speak’ about the event that is unfolding in the name of God, or better, “the evocative discourse that articulates the event.”<sup>837</sup> It is what Johann Meylahn calls, “God-talk after the death of God.”<sup>838</sup> But

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<sup>834</sup> Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, pg. 27. See, pp. 93-104 for Moody’s account of Caputo’s ‘hyper-realist materialism,’ which is congenial to this study.

<sup>835</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 74.

<sup>836</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-109.

<sup>837</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 103.

<sup>838</sup> See Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk: A conversation between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida*, Studies in Philosophical Theology 52 (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

whither this turn to ‘poetics’ (*poiesis*)? Perhaps a brief word is required on this ancient ‘other’ of philosophy and its reception in modernity.

It is well known that since Plato’s tenth book of the *Republic*, the poets (the imitators and sophists) have been construed as the enemies of virtue unfit for Socrates’ city and, therefore, banished for being the purveyors of images, imitations, and appeals to the baser emotions that confound the search for truth, knowledge, and ethical wisdom. Poetry is philosophy’s other; the Platonic distinction between reality and appearance variously repeated all the way down into the history of the metaphysics, epistemology and ontology of Western thought — what Socrates called the ‘ancient quarrel.’ But is it not also true that Socrates had regretted this banishment, inviting the poets back to the city?

Then let this be our defense — now that we’ve returned to the topic of poetry — that, in view of its nature, we had reason to banish it from the city earlier, for our argument compelled us to do so. But in case we are charged with a certain harshness and lack of sophistication, let’s also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy...if the poetry that aims at pleasure and limitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least should admit it, for we are aware of the charm it exercises.<sup>839</sup>

The re-admission of poetry back into ‘the city’ has been the pre-occupation of much twentieth century philosophy. Influentially, Martin Heidegger argued that the Platonic model of what it means ‘to be’ that plagues Western thought, led to the forgetfulness of being as such and consequently dispensed a ‘technological’ and ‘functionalist’ view of ourselves and the world.<sup>840</sup> Against the Platonic technological tradition, he argued for a return to poetry.<sup>841</sup> If Being, he writes, “as the element of thinking, is abandoned by the technical interpretation of thinking” and it’s ‘Occidental logic’ sanctions this interpretation, then “the liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation.”<sup>842</sup> The poem (Trakl’s *A Winter Evening*, in this case) is ‘pure speaking’ for

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<sup>839</sup> Plato, G.M. Grubbe (trans.), rev. C.D.C. Reeve, “Republic” in John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (eds.) *Plato: The Complete Works* (Indiana: Hackett, 1997), pg. 607b.

<sup>840</sup> See Martin Heidegger, William Lovitt (trans.), “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, [1954] 1977), pp. 3-35.

<sup>841</sup> See Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pp. 148-168; pg. 148.

<sup>842</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” in David Farrell Krell (ed.) *Basic Writings of Heidegger* (New York: Harper Collins, [1947] 1993), pp. 217-265; pp. 218, 219. Emphasis added.



Heidegger, it is not an utterance in the traditional understanding of language that communicates inner expression but rather it is language itself that ‘speaks,’ summoning into presence ‘thing’ and ‘world’ (the fourfold, *Geviert*). In the text of a poem a ‘world’ is created, where ‘things carry out world’ and where ‘things’ are called into nearness and given presence. ‘World’ needs ‘things’ to ‘carry’ (*gebären*) it, just as ‘world’ grants ‘things’ their presence. It is this intimate separation between ‘world’ and ‘thing’ which is called ‘dif-ference’ (*Ereignis*).<sup>843</sup>

Heidegger’s later thought, which became increasingly more mythical and entangled with poetic reflections, announced the ‘linguistic turn’ in continental philosophy. And it was in this context that the possibility of Heidegger’s ‘last God’ came to the fore.<sup>844</sup> As discussed in chapter three, Heidegger’s obsession with removing the layers of conceptual and representational thinking in the later writings, lead him further into mysticism and the language of ‘letting be’ (*Gelassenheit*). Being is not something to be grasped but something that is ‘granted’ by language. “Thoughts come to us; we do not think them up. Thinking is a gift or a grace, an event that overtakes us, an address that is visited upon us.”<sup>845</sup> Gift, grace, event, visitation – these themes in Heidegger’s later writing would attract both Catholic and Protestant luminaries, from Lotz to Rahner, and Bultmann to Ott, respectively. But the real problem was not that Heidegger was undoubtedly transferring Christian categories to Greek texts, and thus opening up possibilities for Christian theologians, but rather that he was attempting to Hellenize them in such a way so as to “decontaminate” them of their “Jewish and Christian impurities.”<sup>846</sup> And so here, (theo)poetics became the essentialization of mytho-poetics (and then mytho-theo-politics) of Greek pagan gods, which sought to eliminate the Hebraic myth of justice. The perverse consequence<sup>847</sup> of which is that Heidegger’s thought suffers from any tangible response to suffering or vulnerable bodies.<sup>848</sup> The *text* from which Heidegger’s gods emerged received an exclusive *context*, or foundational myth, instead of

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<sup>843</sup> See Martin Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter (trans.) “Language” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Perennial, [1971] 2001), pp. 187-208. See Caputo’s discussion which has been covered in chapter to in *Heidegger and Aquinas*, pp. 147-153, as well as Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*, pp. 66-75.

<sup>844</sup> Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*, pp. 75-77.

<sup>845</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pg. 179.

<sup>846</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 181.

<sup>847</sup> The perversity of this logic culminates, Caputo notes, in Heidegger’s scandalous comparison of food-industry *Technik* to the gas chambers of the Nazis. See Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pg. 164.

<sup>848</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pg. 128. Moreover, “[t]he victim has no voice in the call of Being, cannot speak, cannot be heard...Victims have been robbed of their voice, do not have the means to register a protest on their own behalf about the damage that has been done to them. Victims do not make their appearance on the register of Being.” *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145. See also John D. Caputo, “Thinking, Poetry and Pain” in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 28 (1989), Supplement, pp. 155-181.

remaining within the unthought element (*a-lethia*) which grants the epoch in which Greek thought took place.<sup>849</sup>

After Heidegger, a great many predominantly French intellectuals (from Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze, Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida), attempted to go further than Heidegger to avoid getting caught up in his deepening of the hermeneutic project. For Caputo, it was Derrida who remained most faithful to the ‘flux.’ He turned Heidegger’s ‘onto-hermeneutics’ — which attempted to ‘arrest the play’ of interpretation in the dream of a more originary ‘closeness’ and ‘belonging together’ between ‘Man’ and ‘Being’ — on itself, viz. he allowed the ‘play of thinking’ (*Spiel des Denkens*) to use Heidegger’s own phrase, to remain *in play*. Poetics, in the Derridian sense, departs from the deep meditative theopoetics of the German *Schwarzwald*, to a poetics that affirms that there is no transcendental signified and no originary epoch of Being to which ‘man’ must be restored — there is only *play*.<sup>850</sup>

If theopoetics is not a ‘meditative’ nostalgia for the great Greek *Anfang*, then, as illustrated in chapter four, poetics passes through the crucible of a ‘poetics of obligation,’ the step that Heidegger’s thought was incapable of making. In Caputo’s deconstructive analysis, *Against Ethics*, we learned that poeticizing a ‘hyperbolic’ ethics does not involve the poetry of Love or of Christian *Sittlichkeit* (Hegel), but points to a paradoxical poetry of the beauty of ugliness. Obligation comes over us in the form of the ugly Abrahamic Other to disrupt Kantian autonomy and the beauty of *harmonia* in the Hegelian family of Love.<sup>851</sup> Thus, the deconstructive concern is not to renounce poetry but to ‘poeticize differently.’ In the context of *Against Ethics*, it was noted that Caputo’s poeticizing discourse — the interplay between heteromorphism and heteronomism — winds up rhetorically prioritizing a tragic-Nietzschean arc, with the effect that obligation to the other is construed as a hierarchical force that must be ‘actively’ resisted for the sake of ‘becoming’ (Deleuze). It was suggested that the properly ‘affirmative’ stance of poeticizing is better understood when placed in the context of the

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<sup>849</sup> Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>850</sup> “The other [interpretation], which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology — in other words, throughout his entire history — has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play.” See Jacques Derrida, Alan Bass (trans.) “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, [1978] 2001), pp. 369-370.

<sup>851</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pp. 10-12. The ‘ugly’ Abrahamic Other is a reference to Hegel’s early writings on Christianity, see G.W.F. Hegel, T.M. Knox (trans.) “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate” in G.W.F. Hegel, T.M. Knox, *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, [1971] 1996), pp. 182-301.

human condition as itself deconstructed, that is, not merely a question of ethics and judgement, but the very nature of deconstructive faith, religion and God (*theos*).

The commitment to ‘every other as wholly other’ is the structural possibility of ‘the religious’ for Derrida, and thus a ‘poetics of the human condition’<sup>852</sup> is like the cries, tears, prayers and passions of a certain faith. In chapter five, this faith deconstructed Christianity and the faith of determinable religion in favor of a ‘religion without religion.’ Taken as a repetition of the ‘non-dogmatic doublet of dogma,’ faith becomes severed from the Truth – a blind faith where “faith is the only recourse for the blind.”<sup>853</sup> We saw most forcefully via the messianic, apocalyptic, and the gift, that Caputo interprets deconstruction as fundamentally affirmative insofar as the structural inaccessibility (of the coming Messiah, the Gift, the Secret etc.) is precisely the condition by which faith gets underway. That is, *the impossible* – another name for God (*theos*), democracy, the event, messianic – is the *quasi-transcendental* condition for the possible, and it is this *experience* (a religious experience) which is experienced in an impassioned ‘productive’ way. Through prayers and tears, Derrida and Caputo call upon the impossible ‘to come’ just as they are called upon *by* the impossible to prepare for its coming. They are in a continual search of a “certain God,” “a God whose name [they are] constantly seeking.”<sup>854</sup>

In *Weakness of God*, theopoetics follows this fundamental affirmation of *the impossible* (God/event).<sup>855</sup> As the primary discourse which ‘articulates the event’ it has to do with a double gesture that begins by scandalizing the logic of *theo-logy*, delimiting its normative propositions and addressing itself to – while also being addressed *by* – the call of the other. This scandal proceeds from the implied ‘hermeneutic pre-understanding’ (the ‘hermeneutic situation’) of the call’s unknown provenance. The event of the name of God undergoes a radical phenomenological reduction (*epoche*) where its phenomenality resides precisely in the indeterminacy of the caller.<sup>856</sup> The self-concealment of the caller (being/God) is the unconcealment of this refusal, which is constitutive of the call as such and a “part of its positive

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<sup>852</sup> Caputo, “The Return of Anti-Religion”, pg. 38.

<sup>853</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 311.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid., pg. 286.

<sup>855</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pp. 101-112.

<sup>856</sup> See Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (trans.) *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell, [1962] 2016), pg. 319, §57. “The peculiar indefiniteness of the caller and the impossibility of making more definite what this caller is, are not just nothing; they are distinctive for it in a *positive* way.”

phenomenal makeup, a positive function of its weak force, and a permanent feature of our anarchic and weakened theological condition.”<sup>857</sup>

In its second gesture, this scandal for theology becomes the ‘symbolic space’ in which ‘the possibility for something life-transforming’ can take place.<sup>858</sup> Paradigmatically, the symbolic space that gives life to this scandal is the “constellation of idioms, strategies, stories, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors” found in the New Testament narratives of the kingdom of God. Caputo writes of the kingdom that “the paradoxes usually take the form of reversals: the last shall be first; the insiders are out; sinners are preferred; the stranger is the neighbor; enemies are to be loved; and, as a general rule, a generally unruly rule, the impossible is possible.”<sup>859</sup> The Scriptures, therefore, also undergo a reduction (*epoche*) in that they are not communicants of divine truth or the object of historical-scientific study only, but they are also events of a call. Truth is to be found in the poetic truth of the event which calls; “it wants to *become true*, to *make itself true*, to *make itself come true*, to be transformed into truth, so that its truth is a species of truth as *facere veritatem*.”<sup>860</sup>

The kingdom of God as the site of symbolic space poeticizes the impossible not for the sake of aesthetic flare, but as a way to “give voice to the call that *contradicts* the world.”<sup>861</sup> Importantly, and this point is consistently misread, the call or event, while it *exceeds* the world remains supremely concerned *with* the world. The reason for this is that theopoetics is not a discourse articulating another place or time (the ‘where’ or the ‘when’ of the event of the kingdom, for if it were, it would be akin to a two-worlds Augustinianism), it rather asks the question ‘how’ the event is to be negotiated *between* world and kingdom? Caputo makes this abundantly clear:

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<sup>857</sup> Ibid., pp. 113-116; pg. 114. Naturally, the terms ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘phenomenology’ as presented here are to be read through Caputo’s previous radicalization of them through Derrida in *Radical Hermeneutics*. For example, when he speaks of the ‘phenomenological reduction’ he assumes Derrida’s critique in the preface to Husserl’s “The Origin of Geometry,” what Caputo calls the ‘grammatological’ or ‘semiological’ reduction that renders not only meaning as a constituted effect, but also the self-presence of consciousness as itself an effect of the iterability of signs. See Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 120-152.

<sup>858</sup> Ibid., pg. 104.

<sup>859</sup> Ibid., pg. 106.

<sup>860</sup> Ibid., pp. 117-121; pg. 118.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., pg. 107. As David Miller contends, the ‘aesthetic’ ornamentation of theological language should be rightly understood as ‘theopoetry’ and not as theopoetics. However, Miller seems to imply that since Caputo wants to be ‘done with the death of God’ his nourishment of a new sense of God is theopoetry. This is, of course, to completely misunderstand how Caputo reads the death of God and the possibility of God as an event. A theopoetics of the event does not refer to “an extant religious faith or knowledge,” on the contrary, it proceeds exactly from a delimitation of such faith and knowledge. Caputo would broadly agree, however, with the ‘Four marks’ of theopoetics with which Miller concludes his article. See David L. Miller, “Theopoetry or Theopoetics,” in *Cross Currents* 60. 1 (March, 2010), pp. 6-23. See also Caputo’s footnote on Miller’s article, *Insistence of God*, pg. 272, fn. 4. See also Johann Meylahn’s discussion, which follows Miller’s, in the short step from theopoetry to theopolitics. Meylahn has the dangers of Heidegger’s Greek *Anfang* in mind as noted above. See Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*, pp. 301-310.

“the logic of the world and the poetics of the kingdom do not describe two different places...or this world and the other one behind the clouds, except poetically, differentiating two different orders of signification that contend with each other in the only existing world we know.”<sup>862</sup> Thus, in the ‘an-archic’ kingdom of God “logic and passion, truth and justice, concepts and desire, strategies and prayers, astute points and mad stories,” are tensions which cannot be broken. The point, rather, is “to settle into and deploy them, negotiating the distance between them.”<sup>863</sup>

Caputo advocates for a ‘hyper-realism’ – interpreted as an intensification of faith (‘existential magnification’) – by means of the reduction from the *logos* of the divine being to the theopoetics of the call.<sup>864</sup> This promissory note (indeed, nothing more than just a note, and thus the point at which re-formulation will be required) of hyper-realism promises neither a new postmodern version of ‘theological realism,’<sup>865</sup> nor an ‘anti-realism’ frolicking in the fields of metaphor and disseminative play without any ethical bearing. It is rather the ‘beyond real’ or ‘not yet real’ of an urgent call/claim that is made upon us and that we pray and hope for. In short, theopoetics is the language given to an existential hyper-realism, an event of God. The name of God is ‘saved’ by not being kept ‘safe’ from the event. And in this saving is the impossible possibility of theopoetics, lodging “me more deeply than ever in the heated rush of existence, the booming, bussing confusion of everyday life, by exposing me to being’s restless heart, attuned to life’s expectant, open-ended momentum.”<sup>866</sup>

## II. The ‘Theos’ of *Theo*-poetics

In the conclusion of this study, it will be argued that for not unrelated reasons Caputo reformulates his account of ‘theopoetics’ in *Weakness of God* to a re-casted Hegelian ‘theopoetics’ in the *Insistence of God*. He does not detract his argument in *Weakness of God*, but senses the need to recast it in light of that which calls, ‘the materiality’ of the event. Caputo has displayed an acute sensitivity to this tension between idealism and empiricism in deconstruction – we

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<sup>862</sup> Ibid.

<sup>863</sup> Ibid., pg. 108.

<sup>864</sup> Ibid., pg. 121.

<sup>865</sup> This is Žižek’s complaint: in Caputo’s reading of the death of God “the field is thereby open for the (re)assertion of the true abyss of Divinity as a Spectral Promise.” Although, as Caputo has pointed out, it seems Žižek has not read these passages of *Weakness of God* but is instead referring to his abridged version of this argument in the dialogue with Vattimo (*After the death of God*) and his book for a popular audience, *On Religion*. See Slavoj Žižek, “Dialectical clarity versus the misty conceit of paradox” in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, pp. 234-306; pg. 260 and Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pp. 147-154. Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 123.

<sup>866</sup> Ibid., pg. 121.

have just seen in *Weakness of God* this sensitivity provoking the discussion of a ‘hyper-realism.’ Nonetheless, a number of parallel developments, some external and others internal to his thought, have led to his quasi-reappraisal of the material in the *Insistence of God*. We attend to the ‘external’ developments first before remarking on the ‘internal’ developments, which have to do with the ‘theos’ of *theo-poetics*, that is, the status of determinable or indeterminable theology in a theology of the event.

Beginning externally, then, since the late 80’s and mid-90’s when Derrida’s work was in the heat of its political, religious and biological overtones,<sup>867</sup> there was a growing awareness that he was departing from deconstruction ‘as writing,’ by re-writing it into another ‘motor scheme,’ as Clayton Crockett comments following Catherine Malabou.<sup>868</sup> Alongside this broad shift in the way deconstruction was being written (and read) in terms of its political and biological significance, there came Malabou’s ground-breaking doctoral thesis on Hegel, later published as *The Future of Hegel* (1996).<sup>869</sup> There was something of a common cause in the *Académie française* of Derrida’s generation, which could quite easily be identified as an anti-Hegelianism (among the likes of Levinas, Lyotard and Deleuze). But when Malabou’s book appeared with the thesis that there *is* an event in Hegel (she calls this ‘explosive plasticity,’ that which has the capacity to give and receive form), along with Derrida’s more sympathetic tone toward Hegel in the preface — although ultimately still weary of ‘Hegel’s future’ — there was a discernable sea-change.<sup>870</sup>

Coinciding with the latter was a general mood that the textual focus of hermeneutic philosophy was drawing its limits and that a more ‘material’ or ‘carnal’ approach was necessary. The recently edited volume by Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), is emblematic in this regard. In his opening essay, Kearney remarks with reference to the orientations of Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida, that “hermeneutics increasingly engaged with structural linguistics and deconstruction.” And that “textuality

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<sup>867</sup> We refer the reader again to the works of Clayton Crockett and Michael Naas, who have taken up the task of consolidating Derrida’s continued significance: see Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing* (2018), and Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (2008).

<sup>868</sup> Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>869</sup> Catherine Malabou, Lisabeth During (trans.) *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialect* (London: Routledge, [1996] 2005).

<sup>870</sup> See Jacques Derrida, Joseph D. Cohen (trans.) “A time for farewells: Heidegger (read by) Hegel (read by) Malabou” in *Ibid.*, pp. vii-xlvii. For recent comments made in this vein, see the interview with Creston Davis, “Zizek, Hegelian theology after Lacan, and philosophical crisis”, interviewed by Richard Marshall. *3:AM Magazine*, 28 Sep 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/zizek-hegelian-theology-after-lacan-and-philosophical-crisis/>



swallowed the body and turned it into *écriture*.”<sup>871</sup> Despite the fact that hermeneutics never ceased to be phenomenological, Kearney continues, “there is no denying the linguistic *turn to the text* was often construed as a *turning away from the flesh* – in practice if not in principle.”<sup>872</sup> Since hermeneutics is not just about text but also about body, and therefore body is about text, it is not surprising that this volume of Kearney’s emphasizes a number of phenomenological voices to bridge the gap between hermeneutics and phenomenology.<sup>873</sup> In accordance with this critique as we have seen above, a first wave of materialist projects which deride the postmodern as a flaccid play of signifiers (Žižek and Badiou), also signaled a new second wave of materialism. Largely in the wake of Badiou, this wave turns away from phenomenology to a new ‘Speculative Realism’ or ‘New Materialism,’ as it is also sometimes called. This movement is spear-headed by Quentin Meillassoux and a cluster of thinkers associated with ‘Object Orientated Ontology.’<sup>874</sup>

Through the combination of these external movements in continental philosophy along with tensions ‘internal’ to Caputo’s own work after *Weakness of God*, it cannot be denied that *Insistence of God* can be partially read as a response to these conditions.<sup>875</sup> Before turning to the actual discussions Caputo takes up in this text, some internal debates that have occurred in the intervening years since *Weakness of God* are also worth mentioning, since they too have contributed to his revised notion of theopoetics. In this respect, a volume of essays emerged titled *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion* (2012), which seems to have its finger on the pulse of concerns being raised here.<sup>876</sup> The essence of this volume’s critique has to do with the il/logic of the *sans* discussed in chapter four, or the problem of the ‘with’ that Joeri

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<sup>871</sup> See Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (eds.) *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pg. 16.

<sup>872</sup> Ibid., pg. 17. Original emphasis.

<sup>873</sup> In this context, it is also telling that one of Derrida’s last published books, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000), returns to the thought of Nancy and the tradition of touch since Aristotle as a whole, and which includes Derrida’s own relationship with phenomenology and the material. See Jacques Derrida, Christine Irizarry (trans.) *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [2000] 2005). This book was much anticipated since its genesis as an article, which first appeared in English a year after the French version in 1992. See Jacques Derrida, Peggy Kamuf (trans.) “Le toucher” in *Paragraph* 16. 2 (1993), pp. 122-157. For a comprehensive review of this book see Michael Naas, “In and Out of Touch: Derrida’s ‘Le toucher’” in *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001), pp. 258-265.

<sup>874</sup> See John D. Caputo, “Continental Philosophy of Religion: Then, Now, and Tomorrow” in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26. 2 (2012), pp. 1-24; pp. 15-16. See Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier (trans.) *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, [2006] 2008). See Crockett’s discussion of this movement in relation to Derrida: Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing*, pp. 74-92.

<sup>875</sup> Although we will not attend to all these discussions below, we can note here that *The Insistence of God* contains extended engagements with many thinkers of this ‘materialist turn,’ (including, Catherine Malabou, Slavoj Žižek and Quentin Meillassoux) revealing at least the pressing nature of their concerns on his thought.

<sup>876</sup> See J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister (eds.) *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward A Religion With Religion* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

Schrijvers has also recently commented on.<sup>877</sup> Schrijvers' unease echoes that of the contribution made by Stephen Minister in the above volume, who says that "[m]y primary concern is not that 'religion without religion' is a bad idea, but that Caputo's 'religion without religion' seems to emphasize the 'without' more than the 'religion.'<sup>878</sup> Similarly, Schrijvers phenomenologically informed criticism over the status of the material is also evident in this announcement found in his recent book, *Between Faith and Belief* (2016):

When I state that Caputo's stress on the movement of the event, of the how of the *infinition*, is a bit of a stretch, I mean that this movement of the 'beyond' in Caputo sometimes seems to occur at the expense of finite historical constructions in which it nevertheless takes place. This is not to say that there is a disdain for the empirical in Caputo, but surely there is somewhat of a neglect of factual being-in-the-world.<sup>879</sup>

Caputo's response to these and other objections are published at the end of *Reexamining Deconstruction*, over eighty pages which recount his approach to hermeneutics and radical theology and which foreground a number of points revisited in *The Insistence of God*. The critics in this volume wonder if Caputo's 'religion *without* religion' does not countersign *any* truth in religious traditions. For Caputo, this is a category mistake because it treats religious truth as a propositional, where for him religious truth is found in the response these traditions make to

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<sup>877</sup> The problem of the 'with' is not altogether a recent development, but rather a re-surfacing in light of Caputo's move to a more theological register. Clarifying this issue is precisely the goal of an earlier volume of essays that was reflecting on Caputo's religious reading of Derrida: see James H. Olthuis (ed.) *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002), particularly David Goicoechea's essay "Caputo's Derrida," pp. 80-95 and Caputo's response, "Hoping in hope, hoping against hope: a response," pp. 120-149. See also Kevin Hart's reservations about the 'without' in his essay "Without" in Marko Zlomislíć and Neal DeRoo (eds.) *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the work of John D. Caputo* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010.), pp. 80-108. Another reason why this debate is not altogether new is because, in fact, it goes back to the claim made by Radical Orthodoxy that Derrida's deconstruction promotes an ontology of violence which 'denigrates the particular.' See James K.A. Smith, "The Logic of Incarnation: Towards a Catholic Postmodernism" in Neal DeRoo and Brian Lightbody (eds.) *The Logic of the Incarnation: James K.A. Smith's Critique of Postmodern Religion* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2009), pp. 8-9; and John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pg. 311.

<sup>878</sup> Ibid., pg. 77.

<sup>879</sup> See Joeri Schrijvers, *Between Faith and Belief: Toward A Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life* (New York: SUNY Press, 2016), pg. 162. It is important to note that Schrijvers' criticism of Caputo is somewhat narrowly construed. It makes no reference to *Insistence of God*, and predominantly draws on the essay at the end of *Reexamining Deconstruction*: see John D. Caputo, "On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology" in *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion*, pp. 271-353. Justin Sands concurs with this narrow reading of Caputo as well as some of the other authors treated in this volume. See Justin Sands, Review of "Between Faith and Belief: Toward a Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life" in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26 (2018), pp. 118-122. Parenthetically, Caputo's essay is probably the closest abridged version of his thought to date and contains a number of fascinating biographical kernels, which, as far as this author is aware, were previously not in print. For example, defending himself against Simmons assertion that he does not take propositional truth seriously, he speaks of his most earliest intellectual development as a student under the mathematical logician, Hugues Leblanc, a former student of the analytic philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine at Harvard, pg. 394, fn. 6.

the ‘truth of the event.’<sup>880</sup> In making these claims, the contributors are worried that Caputo’s theology of the event is ‘too thin’ and leaves no room for determinate forms of Christianity. Since these positions argue from the point of view of determinate faith (largely evangelical), which they agree should be delimited and made contingent (on Postmodern-Kantian grounds), they end up misconstruing Derrida’s distinction between belief (*croyance*) and faith (*foi*), that is, the distinction between theism and atheism. Caputo’s religious reading of Derrida is precisely the affirmative disturbance of this distinction. He does not deny religious traditions – we are always inevitably caught up in a certain ‘world-disclosure’ (*croyance*) – but his point is that these disclosures are not themselves the deposits of religious truth, they are historical effects of a “deeper, more elusive, more uncertain and unsafe ‘faith’ (*foi*).”<sup>881</sup> The real ‘problem’ seems to be at the level of discourse and a certain ‘whimsy’ in Caputo’s language of theopoetics. Consider the following formulations in *Weakness of God*:

A logic addresses real or possible occurrences in the world, while a poetics addresses the event of being addressed, not by what actually is but by what is promising.<sup>882</sup>

And a few pages later,

the logic of the world is a calculus, an economy, a heartless system of accounting or of balanced payments, where scores are always being settled. In the logic of the world, nothing is for free and nobody gets off scot-free. By the same token, in the logic of the world, everything is for sale, everything has a price, and nothing is sacred.<sup>883</sup>

In these quotations, there is a sense of opposition between world and kingdom, another binary in which the world seems to come out second best. However, one only needs to read but a few lines further in both cases to see that Caputo does not mean to denigrate the world, “they [world and kingdom] do not describe two different places...they describe, not two different ‘wheres,’ but two different ‘hows,’ whose differences must be negotiated in the one and only world we know.”<sup>884</sup> Indeed, the second part of *Weakness of God* is an entire attempt to engage the ‘world-disclosure’ of the New Testament in order to ‘feel’ for the events that are contained

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<sup>880</sup> Caputo, “On Not Settling,” pp. 277-278.

<sup>881</sup> Ibid., pg. 275.

<sup>882</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 103.

<sup>883</sup> Ibid., pg. 107.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid.

in these extraordinary narratives. The criticism of the *without* or *sans* in Caputo's religion, supposedly at the expense of material factual being-in-the-world, is at root a misreading of what Caputo calls the 'second order discourse' of theopoetics or 'weak theology.' The second order discourse of theopoetics seemingly does not take into account the fact that "the first order discourse of confessional theologies inevitably forms, informs, and deforms the second-order discourse."<sup>885</sup> In making this claim, these critics treat Caputo's theology of event not as a 'how' of religious discourse, but as the nihilistic inversion of metaphysical Augustinianism – a 'what' of religious discourse that is *without* any content. Caputo then introduces a third order of discourse to clear this confusion. The first order we have mentioned is the level of 'what-discourse' we see in determinate religion, the second is the 'meta-discursive' theory of deconstruction in *Prayers and Tears* (the 'how'), and the third, which is taking place in *Weakness of God*, is a *different* kind of 'what', that is, a 'constructive' repetition of Christianity; 'doing deconstruction' and 'doing theopoetics.'<sup>886</sup> Caputo even goes as far as calling this 'constructive theology' – but with scare quotes. It is the *mutual intertwining* of the constructive phases of a 'theopoetics' and the dominant first order theology which is lost on these critics. But this confusion we are suggesting is also a product of a residual Kantian version of postmodernism still evident in *Weakness of God*.

Indeed, how else does one explain Caputo's open admission that he will shock his friends "by declaring [himself] a born-again Hegelian."<sup>887</sup> His reason for this, he writes, "the event is an event of truth. The insistence of the event may also be called its insistent 'truth'...It is at this point – truth – that I call upon the approach to religion and religious truth taken by Hegel."<sup>888</sup>

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<sup>885</sup> Caputo, "On Not Settling," pg. 286. On this point, Caputo has even criticized Derrida, namely, that the 'pure messianic' must almost always be another messianism Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pp. 139-143. Caputo uses Heidegger's notion of the 'formal indication' to move beyond the universal vs. particular impasse. See the discussion of the messianic-messianism distinction in chapter five, section II.

<sup>886</sup> Caputo, "On Not Settling," pp. 304-306.

<sup>887</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 87. In this line Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt and Jeffrey Robbins, remark in their introduction to *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, that "whereas Caputo's phenomenological reading of a religion without religion took its lead from a Kantian reading of Derrida wherein faith and knowledge are opposed, Caputo now announces a turn from Kant to Hegel." I do not believe that Caputo would accept the claim that is implied here, namely, that he understands faith and knowledge to be simply opposed. However, his turn to 'heretical-Hegelianism' is a not so subtle admission that this is the way his reading of Derrida may have been construed. The turn to Hegel is partially an attempt to remedy this situation. See Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt and Jeffrey Robbins (eds.) *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), pg. 5. It should also be noted that his reflections on Hegel which occur in a more sympathetic mode appear only after *Weakness of God*. See for example, John D. Caputo, "The Perversity of the Absolute, the Perverse Core of Hegel, and the Possibility of Radical Theology," in Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis (eds.) *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion Politics and Dialectic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 47-66; John D. Caputo, "Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Dead?" in Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt and Jeffrey Robbins, *Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 21-33, and John D. Caputo, "Theopoetics as Heretical Hegelianism" in *Crosscurrents* 64. 4 (Dec 2014), pp. 509-534.

<sup>888</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 87.

The ‘truth’ of the event, the making ‘true’ (*facere veritatem*) appears throughout Caputo’s corpus, so it is not precisely accurate that his concern here is truth *per se*. It is rather, the emphasis on the *insistence* of this truth which he means to foreground. For our purposes, this is why his move to a certain ‘heretical-Hegelianism’ is important, because it gives Caputo the means to articulate and recast theopoetics that bears greater fruit with respect to the materiality of the event, and therefore, the basis for a truly radical political theology of sovereignty.

### III. The Three Pills of Theopoetics

The aim of the first of these two final sections, will be to account for the repetition of theopoetics occurring in *The Insistence of God*. By observing this repetition, we at the same time offer ‘three pills’ of theopoetics,<sup>889</sup> which constitute the hermeneutical status and thus ‘systematic’ contribution of a radical theology for this study. In the second section, by way of conclusion, we connect this pharmaceutical itinerary of theopoetics to the ‘poetic revolution’ suggested by Derrida’s reading of Paul Celan in *The Beast and The Sovereign*. This poetic revolution, which is found in the context of a political revolution (the French revolution), moves ‘beyond or outside political majesty,’ beyond the classic sovereign, and thus inaugurates a ‘second revolution’; a radical-political-theological revolution of sovereignty. What follows below, therefore, will affirm the thesis set out at the beginning of this study, namely, that the *theopoetics* of Caputo’s radical theology provides the discursive resources with which to re-conceive the sovereignty of God as well as the discourse which mediates it. As we will see, the three pills of theopoetics, however, will not be a ‘program to be followed,’ because a part of what constitutes radical theology’s theopoetics is precisely the resistance to such programmability.

#### 1. God

In *The Insistence of God*, Caputo opens with a ‘theology of perhaps’. The language of perhaps (*peut-être*) borrowed from Derrida can also be translated as ‘may-be,’ and thus could signal a version of a ‘God who may be.’<sup>890</sup> However, Caputo is quick to clarify that ‘perhaps’ is almost

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<sup>889</sup> Ibid., pg. 19. We are directly following Caputo’s scheme of the ‘three pills,’ as he calls them, which in fact structure the book’s three-part divisions. However, our focus in the context of this chapter will be to pay attention to the revisions that take place after *Weakness of God* and which are directed into a discourse of deconstructive materialism.

<sup>890</sup> The echo here is that of Richard Kearney. See, Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2001); and Caputo’s critical distinction of his own project from Kearney’s: John D. Caputo,

exactly interchangeable with his notion of the ‘event’ developed in *Weakness of God*.<sup>891</sup> “My ‘perhaps,’ ‘maybe,’ *peut-être* cuts deeply into the name of God so much that the name (of) ‘God’ takes place in the very element of the *peut-être* itself, of the ‘event’ of the promise which is no less a threat, of the maybe which is also maybe not.”<sup>892</sup> This very slight semantic shift to “the very being of may-being, the very *être* of the *peut-être*,”<sup>893</sup> allows Caputo to draw his theology away from a potentially too sublime alterity of the event. This is why he can now write, “[t]o think ‘perhaps’ is to follow the tracks of a more radical *possibilizing* of the weak force.”<sup>894</sup> The shift is subtle and almost unrecognizable, since the perhaps remains inscribed in *khôral* difference,<sup>895</sup> but the effect creates a closer ‘proximity’ to materiality that was previously missing in *Weakness of God*.

Evidence of this (and also the first pill of a radical theology) is the increasing prominence placed on the intertwining (chiasmic) relationship between existence and insistence, and therefore, on human responsibility, hospitality, and the material.<sup>896</sup> While insistence is like the call of the event of an unidentifiable caller, where a response is only truly responsible when it is enacted not by coercion but by a ‘weak force,’ it is nonetheless still the case that such a response to insistence, the *existence* of insistence, can either be resisted or turn out to be a disaster. Existence and insistence are indissolubly linked by the tension emerging in the chiasmic structure.<sup>897</sup> When Caputo says that “God needs us to be God, and we need God to be human,”<sup>898</sup> he does not thereby imply a metaphysical panentheism. The bringing of the insistence of God *into* existence as the mark of human responsibility is always haunted by the ‘perhaps’ — the possibility of the promise/threat that this existence brings.<sup>899</sup> Proximity to

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“God, Perhaps: The Diacritical Hermeneutics of God in the Work of Richard Kearney,” in Cynthia Willet and Leonard Lawlor (eds.) “Philosophical Thresholds: Crossings of Life and World,” SPEG supplement, *Philosophy Today* 55 (2011), pp. 56-65.

<sup>891</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pp. 4-14. Caputo restates, almost verbatim, the same locutions from *Weakness of God* but replaces the event with perhaps. For example, the ‘weak force of the event’ becomes ‘the weak force of perhaps’ (pg. 4); the ‘event which haunts ontology’ becomes ‘the haunting specter of perhaps’ (pg. 5); ‘the event as the experience of the impossible’ becomes ‘perhaps as the experience of the impossible’ (pg. 11).

<sup>892</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

<sup>893</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

<sup>894</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 6. Emphasis added.

<sup>895</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>896</sup> Richard Kearney has also noticed this shift when he writes in conversation with Catherine Keller, “I think Jack (Caputo) seems to be softening the trauma of deconstructive violence in his renewed emphasis on hospitality and possibility in *The Insistence of God*.” See Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmermann (eds.) *Reimagining The Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pg. 66. The language of insistence is adapted from Hélène Cixous, Derrida’s life-long friend and collaborator; see Hélène Cixous, Peggy Kamuf (trans.) *Insister of Jacques Derrida* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>897</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 29. Caputo is drawing on Ponty’s use of ‘chiasm.’ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alphonso Lingis (trans.) *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

<sup>898</sup> Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pg. 14.

<sup>899</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.



materiality is achieved by a semiotic adjustment not by an alteration of the logic of deconstruction, to which Caputo remains faithful to the end.

The chiasm that consists of insistence and existence in this first pill of radical theology can also be thought of as the postmodern prayer of theopoetics.<sup>900</sup> Insistence is God's call or prayer in the mood of the *modus irrealis*, "a grammatological slippage from the indicative to the subjunctive mood."<sup>901</sup> Where the *irrealis* does not mean 'un-real,' but rather a 'non-reality' (or hyper-real) restless for becoming real. Like God's praying and calling, we pray to God by calling for 'God knows what,' responding to the call by prayer: "Our prayers are our response. God's praying and our praying, God's calling and our responding, God's tears and ours, belong together, are bound together, like a problem and a solution."<sup>902</sup> By the time we take the third pill of theopoetics, this first pill – the postmodern prayer of perhaps that arises out of the chiasm between insistence and existence – will take on a *cosmic* function. In order to continue to soften the shock of alterity in the call's residual Kantianism and the too subjectivist anthropocentrism this structure might imply, the prayer of theopoetics becomes more like a song or poem that is sung to the world, and thus, a still deeper religious affirmation for the world and its carnal materiality.<sup>903</sup>

Here we already see that the subjunctive mood for Caputo, following Derrida, is a modality of transcendence occurring *within* the immanent structures of language, text, existence. This is not a non-realist position, but is more in accordance with what Wessel Stoker calls a *transcendence as alterity*.<sup>904</sup> The chiasm of insistence and existence 'tightens' the distinction between the undeconstructible event which conditions the structures and strictures of existence. Therefore, while such a radical contingency – subjunctive/middle voice over the indicative/active – is interpreted as the religious 'spirit' of deconstruction, this does not mean it is a postmodern reiteration of the noumenal transcendental. Its infinity lies not "with the infinity of Christian Neo-Platonism but with the infinity of grammatology, the infinity of an in-finitive, open-ended while endlessly contracted and determined in the finitude of the moment."<sup>905</sup>

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<sup>900</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-35.

<sup>901</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>902</sup> Ibid., pg. 31.

<sup>903</sup> Ibid., pp. 176-179.

<sup>904</sup> Wessel Stoker, "Culture and Transcendence: a typology" in Willie van der Merwe and Wessel Stoker (eds.), *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology of Transcendence, Studies in Philosophical Theology*, 50 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), pp. 5-30.

<sup>905</sup> Caputo, "The Return of Anti-Religion," pg. 60.

Significantly, *The Insistence of God* does not spend time dwelling on the ‘an-archic kingdom,’ as was the case in the readings of the biblical narratives given in *Weakness of God*. However, to foreground the volume’s underlying problematic (the status of the material in a radical theology), Caputo ends the first part of *Insistence of God* with a radicalized reading of hospitality in the story of Mary and Martha taken from Luke 10:38-42. Following the cue from Meister Eckhart, who famously reversed the traditional reading that took Mary’s contemplative spirit (*vita contemplativa*) as superior to Martha’s mundane activity (*vita activa*), Caputo argues that Martha is emblematic for the hospitality she shows in attending to Jesus’ physical needs. Whereas Mary contemplates God’s insistence, Martha realizes that the presence of Jesus as the insistence of God requires a deed. “There is a realism and materialism in Martha that is missing from Mary’s beautiful immaterialism that is never made real,” Caputo writes, “and Jesus secretly prefers her materialism. Martha’s world is real and existing, while Mary’s world is world-less, free from the cares of the world, an inexistent worldlessness.”<sup>906</sup>

In the first pill of theopoetics, then, we have a model of an ‘ethics of obligation’ similar to what Caputo has argued elsewhere.<sup>907</sup> Theopoetics has to do with a radical hospitality, indeed, a ‘hosti-pitality,’<sup>908</sup> which means ‘the decision of the other in me,’ an always dangerous decision when the offering of hospitality to the stranger could turn out to be *hostile*. While Caputo will later criticize the human subjectivism that is still latent in Martha’s ‘hospitable agency,’ in favor of widening the scope of theopoetics material implications, what is important at this stage is the attention drawn to Martha’s response to the material conditions of Jesus’ carnal particularity. Indeed, the great scandal of Martha and the poetics of radical theology is to recognize Jesus fully in his carnal fleshly existence and to act in response to its finitude. The insistence of God which occurs in the weakness of flesh, as opposed to the phallic uprightness of the agent-body is the locus of the call to affirm life in all its fleshly failings.<sup>909</sup>

## 2. Theology

If the first pill of radical theology’s theopoetics is to re-affirm or revise the responsibility and the material proximity involved in saying or praying ‘God, perhaps,’ then the second pill of

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<sup>906</sup> Ibid., pg. 45.

<sup>907</sup> See Caputo, *Against Ethics*.

<sup>908</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 40, and Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” in *Acts of Religion*, pp. 360-362.

<sup>909</sup> Ibid., pg. 46. See also Caputo’s discussion of ‘jewgreek’ bodies from which this discussion has its genesis: Caputo, *Against Ethics*, pp. 194-219.

theopoetics addresses the implications this will have at the meta-discursive level, at the level of theology as an order of discourse vis-à-vis confessional theologies. Since the latter is only illustrative of the effects of ‘taking the pill’ as it were, the more important consideration resides in the theoretical adjustments that Caputo makes in his approach to theopoetics. Here, the *inhabitation* of a ‘weak theology’ that was performed in *Weakness of God*, is tempered by a move to Hegel that mounts a more robust critique of an ‘abridged postmodernism’ and its neo-Kantian dualism. The second pill of radical theology’s theopoetics, therefore, offers a more enhanced or stronger ‘dosage’ of theopoetics itself.

In *Weakness of God*, Caputo writes, “I wire the coming of the kingdom together with the incoming of the *tout autre* or the out-coming of the event in deconstruction. Then I run for cover to find a safe place from which to view the sparks it gives off.”<sup>910</sup> Never short of comic imagery, Caputo is here describing the consequences that a ‘sacred anarchy’ of the kingdom will have on ‘strong’ confessional theology — it will send sparks flying! But this accustomed humor elides the tension between confessional theology and radical theology that must consist in the chiasm of existence and insistence. In short, we might ask with seriousness: to where exactly does Caputo run for cover? In *The Insistence of God* he is far less opaque, and makes the obvious Heideggerian point that we may only speak *aus der Erfahrung* of religious experience, we are not abstracted from our factual *being-in-the-world*.<sup>911</sup> He now says in a tone markedly different to that found in *Weakness of God*, “I start with confessional theology while trying to expose it, to expose myself, to its own excess, to hold us all open to the event.”<sup>912</sup> Radical theology for Caputo *derives* from confessional theology, or confessional theology ‘yields’ radical theology, not only when the latter repeats by distorting and deforming, but also when the former responds to what insists. While his ‘ultimate subject matter’ is radical theology, he says that it “might be more properly described as the becoming-radical of confessional theology.”<sup>913</sup>

The decisive move of *The Insistence of God*, and of a re-casted theopoetics we are tracking here, is the revision Caputo makes of his reading of Hegel.<sup>914</sup> Following Kierkegaard’s ruthless

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<sup>910</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, pg. 110.

<sup>911</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>912</sup> Ibid., pg. 60. Consistent with the argument being made in this chapter, concerning Caputo’s self-awareness over the emphasis placed on the ‘without’ and the need to temper this language, he writes, “the most precise way to describe religion without religion is to *re-describe* it as religion with/out religion, inside and outside religion and to situate oneself on the slash between them, and the best way to describe radical theology is in terms of the becoming radical of confessional theology.” Ibid., pg. 96.

<sup>913</sup> Ibid., pg. 61; pp. 68-74.

<sup>914</sup> Caputo makes this concession in a footnote: “I have too often in the past been content with criticizing the part of Hegel that I reject. Here I work out the part of Hegel I accept and that I now realize is central to my project and to all radical theological work.” Ibid., pg. 274 fn. 1.

critique and Derrida's reservations predominantly taken from *Glas*, Caputo has always been wary of Hegel and the totalizing nature of his system. But in *The Insistence of God* he 'drops a bomb.'<sup>915</sup> By returning to Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1827),<sup>916</sup> he claims to find the genesis of radical theology. For Caputo, Kant's reduction of 'rational theology' to ethics and 'revealed theology' to superstition, is repeated in a postmodern Kantian form of philosophy of religion.<sup>917</sup> It uses postmodern theory to 'apologize' Christianity in the face of modern atheistic dogmatism on the one hand, and on the other, puts it to work as an exercise in 'epistemological humility,' "not that there is no God but that we are not God."<sup>918</sup> To this extent, Caputo even concurs with the analysis made by Quentin Meillassoux,<sup>919</sup> that this form of postmodern Kantian philosophy of religion is a kind of 'soft fideism,' content with surrendering its claim to metaphysical defenses of faith in exchange for an epistemologically limited and contingent belief in God. This is to repeat Kant's famous statement, albeit in a postmodern fashion, where he says he has 'found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.' Our argument here is that Caputo recognizes in his own reading of Derrida, at least in *Weakness of God*, a reflection of a certain postmodern Kantianism, especially when the event is construed as an absolute heterology that has little purchase with existing forms of everyday life. He thus argues for another version of philosophy of religion that has its roots in Hegel.

What Hegel accomplishes, according to Caputo, is a philosophy of religion that takes 'revealed theology' seriously by arguing that its truth-content should be understood as an imaginative and figurative *Vorstellung*, a theopoetics of truth that is still 'becoming true.' Caputo interprets *Vorstellung* as "a world-picture, a world-praxis, a world-formation, a world-creation, an event of *poiesis*, of the creative and recreative."<sup>920</sup> The sensuous and superstitious doctrines of Christianity like the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, are not to be discarded, because like art, they receive their higher form of truth in a narrational presentation (*Vorstellung*/theopoetics) and not a literal reading.<sup>921</sup> Religion for Hegel occupies the middle term between art and philosophy. In religion as *Vorstellung*, the Concept — the Absolute as *an*

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<sup>915</sup> Crockett, *Derrida After The End of Writing*, pg. 105.

<sup>916</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, Peter C. Hodgson (ed.) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, One Volume Edition (Berkeley: University of California University Press, 1988).

<sup>917</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pp. 87-88; 98-103.

<sup>918</sup> Ibid., pg. 99.

<sup>919</sup> See Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, pp. 28-49. See also, Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *L'Inexistence Divine*," in Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 231-232.

<sup>920</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 94.

<sup>921</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-89.

*und für sich* – is getting itself re-presented in figural form on its way to full self-conscious thought (philosophy). In this manner, Caputo determines that Hegel has invented radical theology, because contrary to the traditional schema that subordinates rational theology/reason to revealed theology/faith, Hegel's distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* is not one of region (two-worlds or realms) but a distinction in terms of 'degree of clarity.'<sup>922</sup> By the latter he means that Hegel has reduced these oppositions to the point where faith (revealed theology) is now a part of the process of obtaining this-worldly-meaning.

According to Caputo, Hegel thinks the possibility of God after the death of God by elaborating the movement of Spirit within immanence. In its postmodern version, revelation as interruption does not occur from another world, but as the *tout autre* which breaks into this world to reveal another world: "a world disclosure, another way the world itself opens up."<sup>923</sup> However, the postmodern Hegelianism Caputo is defending is read 'heretically' or 'perversely.'<sup>924</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, Caputo rejects the synthesis of the Absolute in which the truth of religious *Vorstellung* is on its way to total self-conscious thought, and which only philosophy is said to consummate. Caputo's replaces *Begriff* with the event, he 'decapitates' the Concept – a 'headless Hegelianism' he calls it – and substitutes it for the event that is going on in religion.

The more robust form of theopoetics Caputo develops now becomes clearer in the distinction between the Kantian and Hegelian versions of philosophy of religion. In the former, theopoetics is accepted as a description of religion as *Vorstellung*, but only insofar as it treats religion (confessional theology) as historically contingent *in order to* keep our focus on God, and thus avoiding the idolatry of worshipping historical constructs. Caputo affirms this, but his heretical Hegelianism goes further. Religion as *Vorstellung* goes all the way down: "it is not merely the case that religion is a *Vorstellung* of God, but that 'God' too is a *Vorstellung*."<sup>925</sup> On this reading, *Vorstellung* is a theopoetics of the event. But unlike *Weakness of God*, theopoetics in this Hegelian mode is given distinct context in the material conditions (life-world, imaginative creation, and praxis) in which the event is getting itself called. Caputo assures that while this is epistemological to the extent that it draws the limits of what we can know, it is

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<sup>922</sup> Ibid., pg. 91.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid., pg. 93.

<sup>924</sup> See Caputo in "The Perversity of the Absolute, the Perverse Core of Hegel, and the Possibility of Radical Theology." Playing off the language of Žižek, Caputo affirms the first Žižekian sense of 'perversity' in Christianity as the death of the metaphysical God, and then repeats Žižek by perverting the 'Core of Hegel,' that is, halting the Absolute by treating it as an event that one cannot see coming.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid., pg. 102.

also more than epistemology and neither is it a newly raised ontology or metaphysics. This theopoetics is a ‘thoroughgoing post-phenomenology’ that has altered the Husserlian subjectivist transcendental field, and opened up a quasi-transcendental anonymity that accords with what Merleau-Ponty would call a ‘poetics of embodiment.’<sup>926</sup>

For this second pill of theopoetics, Caputo goes on to distinguish his Hegelianism by striking up similarities and differences between two other notable accounts we have already mentioned: that of Catherine Malabou and Slavoj Žižek, and to a lesser degree, John Milbank. Since we have already attended to Žižek, and because Milbank appears less prominently in this text, we shall limit these remarks to Malabou.<sup>927</sup> Indeed, in this regard Caputo has also said, “I think that continental philosophers must look to new models, to people like Catherine Malabou, whose work represents something genuinely continental but importantly new.”<sup>928</sup>

Caputo’s position on Hegel is ultimately one of repetition, that is, Hegel can only be taken so far before his thought needs to be delimited. But in Malabou’s ground-breaking work, *The Future of Hegel*, she claims there is a genuine event in Hegel. Contrary to Heidegger, who thinks Hegel’s Spirit does not respect contingency and hence closes off the future, Malabou argues under the concept of ‘plasticity’ that the movement of Spirit is not ‘static’ necessitarian process, but rather a dynamic (*Tätigkeit*) activity. This is important for Malabou’s understanding of Hegel’s impact for theology. Through this dynamic activity, what she calls the “process of substance’s auto-differentiation,”<sup>929</sup> Hegel has invented process theology and the ‘death of God.’ God gives himself at a distance in space and time emblematically in the figure (*Vorstellung*) of Christ and as the ‘becoming accidental of the essential.’<sup>930</sup> Therefore, God is no longer alienated by atemporality, but rather is seen in the auto-transforming process of himself in time.

What Malabou calls ‘Speculative Hermeneutics’ – which we might call her version of theopoetics – is the “art of interpreting historical forms of life as forms of the life of the Spirit, seeing how the outlines of the Absolute emerge from the materials of multiplicity and

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<sup>926</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-112.

<sup>927</sup> An earlier version of the arguments put forward in *The Insistence of God* concerning Malabou can be found at John D. Caputo, “Voir Venier: How Far Plasticity Can Be Stretched,” in Tyler Williams and Jarrod Abbott (eds.) “Plastique: The Dynamics of Catherine Malabou,” special issue, *theory@buffalo* 16 (2012), pp. 102-123.

<sup>928</sup> See John D. Caputo and T. Wilson Dickinson, “Education as Event: A Conversation with John D. Caputo” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 12. 2 (Fall 2012), pg.41.

<sup>929</sup> Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, pg. 54.

<sup>930</sup> Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, pg. 122.



contingency.”<sup>931</sup> Through the emergence of these historical forms of life, as ‘absolute’ contingent events of facticity ‘within the bosom of necessity,’ facticity itself becomes necessary. This reminds Caputo of Heideggerian *Schicksal* (fate), in that we cannot question the origins of Being’s destiny other than what we have received and only after it has been given. This necessity of inherited contingency means that the future is always left open. However, it is at this point that Caputo will register his concerns and distinguish his own position. According to Caputo, if Malabou’s events appear to us contingently, taking us by surprise, this ‘evental’ status is ultimately undermined if we retroactively declare that they were necessary. “If ‘eventually’ the Spirit can see these unforeseeables coming, this undoes the ‘event,’” he writes. And “[h]owever unaccountable Hegel’s ‘perhaps,’ we know in advance that ‘perhaps’ will always have been enlisted in the service of ‘must be.’ Nothing in history can be protected from the destination of Spirit.”<sup>932</sup>

In the final analysis, Caputo follows Derrida by asking ‘how far can plasticity be stretched?’ How plastic, really, is the Spirit when for all the interplay between contingency and necessity – which is certainly a more welcomed reading of Hegel Caputo admires – it nonetheless seems to be un-phased by its contingent unfolding. The reason for this, Caputo argues, is that Spirit on Malabou’s account is not subjected enough to a more *radical* contingency. There is no possibility of a catastrophic explosion of the plastic Spirit itself, it remains only infinitely malleable. The explosive does not exist in Hegel according to Caputo, and thus the event is prevented from taking place: ‘Speculative Hermeneutics’ is not radical hermeneutics.<sup>933</sup> The events that Malabou identifies in Hegel are events to the extent that they represent contingencies and empirical actualities of Spirit, but they cease being events in the radical sense at precisely the moment when their appearance is no longer a breach of the horizon of expectation.<sup>934</sup> Malabou’s theopoetics differs from Caputo’s in that her *adieu* to God – what throughout her text she refers to as the *voir venir* (‘see what is coming’) – is only a goodbye to a certain God (*à Dieu*) of finite, and therefore, infinitely repeatable formations. But this *adieu* is not a goodbye to the infinite Spirit itself. *Adieu* to God is really just an *au revoir* or *voir re-venir* (re-coming). Without the radical sense of theopoetics of ‘perhaps’ there is no future for Hegel nor a future for God, because the condition of possibility of a future, and thus the possibility

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<sup>931</sup> Ibid., pg. 123.

<sup>932</sup> Ibid., pg. 125.

<sup>933</sup> Ibid., pg. 127.

<sup>934</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-131.

for a present formation (particularities, empirical materiality, factual life) is the im/possibility of the ‘to come,’ the perhaps or perhaps not.<sup>935</sup>

And yet, if Caputo has his doubts about how far plasticity can be stretched, it is equally true that Malabou’s plasticity has stretched Caputo’s theopoetics. At the end, Caputo must also follow Derrida in saying that ‘I do not know anymore’ between these choices of the accidental and the essential.<sup>936</sup> It is not a matter of choosing between the Spirit and its necessary contingency, affirming ‘pure’ accident or essence, but about a theopoetics of perhaps which undoes this dialect and where, more importantly, such a theopoetics itself is also only, *perhaps*.

### 3. The Real

If the first two pills of this pharmaceutical itinerary have been 1) to re-formulate the status of a theopoetics of the event in terms of a ‘material’ chiasmic relationship between insistence and existence, and 2) to have deepened theopoetics by stretching it to its limits through a post- or ‘heretical’ Hegelianism, then this final pill of theopoetics will be to incorporate this material emphasis not by a deepening, but by a widening of its scope.<sup>937</sup> As we have argued throughout, these two pills do not constitute anything wholly new for Caputo, but rather a reformulation or recasting of his preceding theological work, which may have harbored an implicit residual Kantianism. As such, we might say that they are still motivated by an essentially (radical) theological humanism.<sup>938</sup> This humanism, albeit inflected in Caputo’s own creative way, is still the project of moving beyond our modern condition. It is the passage — after having read our hermeneutics, phenomenology and deconstruction — through and beyond the God of metaphysics. It is about the relationship between us and God. Between our responsibility (materialism) and God’s prayers, his insistence and solicitation without force (idealism). While no theological reflection worthy of the name can do without a theological anthropology, it is something totally different for anthropology to become anthropocentric. Caputo suspects the

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<sup>935</sup> For a reading of Malabou that challenges Caputo directly, see Clayton Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing*, pp. 106-108. Crockett writes, “Spirit is this errancy and waste, that [for Malabou’s Hegel] it is not a circular process of Spirit becoming itself but an originary metamorphic change that that we call Spirit afterward, in hindsight. It’s not that Spirit cannot die or that there is any limit to what can happen to Spirit by accident; it’s that whatever happens can only be affirmed or imagined to be Spirit essentially so long as there is subjectivity to think it.” Pg. 107. The issue here for Crockett, seems to be on the one hand terminological, since for him Spirit is just the name we retroactively assign to metaphoric change and contingency. On the other hand, understood in this way — that metaphoric change is the essence of form — the problem then becomes that Caputo and Derrida’s event threatens “to swallow up form and induce passivity into philosophy.”

<sup>936</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 134.

<sup>937</sup> Ibid., pg. 174.

<sup>938</sup> Ibid., pg. 167.

latter, and therefore, in a truly novel development (or repetition) he forces theopoetics to account for the cosmic dimension, the non-human, and the non-living. The theopoetics of the insistence of God becomes the cosmo-theopoetics of the insistence of the world: the event of the world, its promise and its threat in a cosmic gesture of chance or grace. In this way, following the model of Martha, Caputo will formulate cosmo-theopoetics as yet a more radical 'realism' and 'religious materialism.'<sup>939</sup>

Turning on the distinction between the humanities and the sciences, Caputo says that cosmo-theopoetics "embraces an ever-wider intertwining of the human and the non-human," and "recognizes the broader reach of 'insistence.'"<sup>940</sup> In this sense, quite literally, *tout autre est tout autre*, whether non-human or non-living, and thus "we must brace ourselves for a wider and more welcoming hospitality."<sup>941</sup> If it is true that the difference between 'us' and the 'world' cannot be so easily separated — since, on the one hand, we too are 'world' in the sense of cosmic materiality (cosmic dust), and on the other, we 'constitute worlds' in the Heideggerian sense — then cosmo-theopoetics is the song, or poem, that responds not to another world, but one that 'sings the world.'<sup>942</sup> The latter is another way 'God' and therefore radical theology comes to us, as an insistent call of the world/God dramatically expanding the range of 'religious materialism.' Caputo writes, "religion, on my account, is all about deeds and bodies, about 'carnal' life, about the elemental conditions of carnality — about food and nourishment, about sickness and health, about birth and death, about children and old age."<sup>943</sup>

To situate the 'cosmic' in cosmo-theopoetics, Caputo argues that continental philosophy has for too long followed in the footsteps of Heidegger's mantra that 'science does not think.'<sup>944</sup> By delimiting scientific reason, a new wave of 'warrior realists' accuses continental (specifically those of the 'theological turn') and analytic philosophers, for not taking radical contingency seriously enough, leading to an epistemological fideism, and thus, the door wide open for

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<sup>939</sup> Ibid., pg. 170. Behind the thoughts of this final pill for Caputo is Derrida's later work on animality. In particular, the disruption of the binary between human and non-human, a sovereign and a beast, and therefore also raising the question of 'post-humanism.' See Jacques Derrida, David Wills (trans.) and Marie-Louise Mallet (ed.) *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). Caputo has also recently attempted to engage the 'post-human': See John D. Caputo, "The Spectre of the Post-Human" in *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (St Ives: Pelican, 2018), pp. 245-272, and John D. Caputo, "On The Wings of Angels: Posthumanism and Info-Technology," in Jeffrey McCurrey (ed.) *The Twenty-Sixth Annual Symposium of The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center* (Pittsburgh: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Centre Duquesne University, 2011), pp. 8-28.

<sup>940</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 174.

<sup>941</sup> Ibid.

<sup>942</sup> A phrase borrowed from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ibid., pp. 95, 97; pp. 174-175. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alphonso Lingis (trans.) *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>943</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 178.

<sup>944</sup> Ibid., pg. 186.

God's return. This is part of the argument of Quentin Meillassoux mentioned above, and the part with which Caputo broadly agrees.<sup>945</sup> In response to the realists' complaint, Caputo implores his continental colleagues to take the 'objectivity' of physics seriously, where objectivity is understood on 'strictly phenomenological grounds' *as if* "we were dead or had never been born."<sup>946</sup> If the latest physics, as the study of the real, has the most complete theory of everything, 'perhaps,' which is that we are moving toward entropic dissipation, then theopoetics must be re-inscribed into this cosmic voyage. Cosmo-theopoetics is the description of how we are to respond *while we are alive*, in the midst of the 'objective' (*as if* we were dead) claim of astrophysics: that the universe will, perhaps, terminate in cosmic destruction.

By qualifying 'objectivity' as a phenomenological category, Caputo clearly draws a distinction between himself and this form of realism, which has also emerged as the self-styled school of Object-Orientated Ontology (OOO). In a swift but systematic critique, Caputo uncovers what is ultimately a straw-man underlying their central criticism; that all post-Kantian philosophy is a form of 'correlationism.' The Kantian catastrophe for the speculative realism of OOO is philosophy's obsession with mediation. This follows from the focus on transcendental conditions for knowledge at the expense of any access to the real (objects). Husserl is important in this context because he spoke of 'correlational analysis,' and attempted a reversal of Kantian transcendentalism by turning to the phenomena themselves as they appear to consciousness. While Husserl's language, Caputo admits, may have been unguarded in its flirtation with idealism and excessive cognitivism (most clearly flagged by the hermeneutic tradition after Heidegger) he argues that correlation "itself is simply a law of direct proportions about knowing and the known." Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour and the example of scientific inquiry, correlation simply means that 'constructing' a scientific account through a complexity of tools and a scientific community, makes scientific objects 'more real,' it does not relativize science: 'the more construction, the more reality.'<sup>947</sup> Demonizing correlation implies that objects fall from the sky, not that objects are made more real when subjectivity is supposedly stripped away (if this were even possible). Paradoxically, then, speculative realism looks

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<sup>945</sup> Ibid., pp. 185-189.

<sup>946</sup> Ibid., pp. 190-191.

<sup>947</sup> Ibid., pp. 200-201. From arguments drawing on Derrida's early work on phenomenology, Caputo is still critical of correlation's 'binarity': "The limitation of the word is to suggest a merely two-sided (and implicitly dualistic) relation between 'consciousness' and 'reality,' which is testimony not to metaphysical idealism but to Husserl's excessive cognitivism and his residual privileging of the paradigm of thinking as 'looking at' (*an-schauen*), which is what Latour calls the pure 'gaze.' That is why, following Derrida, I like to emphasize the middle voice, something that is 'getting itself done'." Pg. 204.

more like a renewed subjectivism<sup>948</sup> or theology of rupture,<sup>949</sup> and ultimately self-destructs by “denying our access to reality in order to preserve the reality of the real.”<sup>950</sup>

Caputo’s cosmo-theopoetics wants to maintain the integrity of science, not in the interest of vulgar realism, but on phenomenological grounds for the reason that despite physics offering the best provisional account of the cosmos as entropic dissipation, it alone is insufficient to account for the intertwining chiasmic relationship between human reality and the non-human. The chiasmic nature of cosmo-theopoetics (which is Caputo’s version of ‘correlation’ that avoids the subject-object binary) means not that we denigrate the world of ‘objects’ (the material) by an excessive subjectivist reduction, but that *we are* objects a part of the world and who are capable of reflecting on it. If cosmo-theopoetics elicits something different to fideism, and if it is to take the new cosmology seriously, then what is this difference precisely? This is the question of a radical theology in the context of the new cosmology: the ever-increasing likelihood of cosmic death, perhaps.

What is the meaning of the meantime? What are we to make of this time, the time of cosmic death, the time ‘as if we were dead?’ There is a Pauline analogy here from the Corinthian passage (7:25-31) where time is passing away and we are to live *hos me* (as if not), but with the crucial difference that cosmic death supplies new meaning not in terms of temporal facticity – a specific time *in* life – but *cosmic* facticity, where life itself is passing away, “*die Welt*, the world we live in, the world of all life.”<sup>951</sup> This is nihilism, but not simple materialist nihilism that is allowed to run amok by reducing life to death. For Caputo, nihilism or impermanence is the condition for life itself. It is an *intensification* that can be called ‘grace’ – a ‘nihilism of grace.’ And this is ultimately a theo-poetical materialism, not because we are going to be saved from death but because death is the condition for life. The cosmo-theopoetics of radical theology embraces faith in life (the promise) just as it cannot guarantee un-faith or safety from cosmic death (threat). “This is faith in the promise/threat.”<sup>952</sup> Life and the world are an event insofar as they are passing away, eventually or perhaps. They are the insistence in the chiasm where existence is our response – which is faith in more life, perhaps. The perhaps is the may-being of more life, which means even though life may be passing away, anywhere where there is life there is still the chance for more.

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<sup>948</sup> See Thomas Lemke, “Materialism without matter: the recurrence of subjectivism in object-orientated ontology” in *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 18. 2 (2017), pp. 133-152.

<sup>949</sup> Caputo, *Insistence of God*, pg. 201.

<sup>950</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 206-210

<sup>951</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 225.

<sup>952</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 229.

The challenge set out at the beginning of this section was whether or not the ‘theopoetics of radical political theology’ was sufficient, on the one hand, to dispel the charge of abstracted Kantian transcendentalism and an idealistic play of sublime alterity, while simultaneously on the other hand, to resist the temptation to devolve into particularism or empiricism. With regard to the latter, we saw that the ‘poetics’ of theopoetics, certainly does not end up in particularism, insofar as poetics is not a discourse that speaks *for* something particular, a Being, entity, God, or transcendental signified, but rather lets ‘language speak’ in its context without being limited to that context, since this context (e.g. Greek *Anfang*) is but a construction and therefore not originary or essential. Theopoetics participates in the disseminative drift of *différance*. It is not a participation in a grand narrative of theopoetry or theopolitics as David Miller has noted,<sup>953</sup> but neither is the participation or ‘play’ arbitrary or frivolous; it arises out of the structural obligation toward the other which has left its trace in language. Theopoetry and theopolitics – whether read as the rise of religious fundamentalisms or the techno-scientific logic of global capitalism – are universalisms that seek to reduce the Other to the same, as Levinas would say. The desire for imperialistic knowledge whether from the left or the right of the political spectrum, presenting *the* way of truth in the midst of political challenges, is deeply haunted by the theopoetics of radical theology.

The accomplishment of theopoetics in this regard is less controversial, as even the ‘light’ version of postmodernism would affirm certain epistemological limits to truth. However, to meet the former challenge of resisting distanced or sublime alterity (the problem of the ‘without’) is more difficult. Here we saw that the ‘theos’ of theopoetics can often be misunderstood in terms of locality and place – ‘where’ is God? Does the event of God occur in a movement ‘beyond’ at the expense of finite historical constructions in which it nevertheless takes place? On the contrary, the event does not raise the question ‘where’ but ‘how’? To ask ‘where’ is to operate in the order of existence, but to ask ‘how’ is to shift to the order of *insistence*, where truth is not ‘found,’ but created (*facere veritatem*) in existence. The event calls (insists) just as it is being called upon (existence).

In this recasting of theopoetics, we have demonstrated that Caputo sharply dismisses any Kantian transcendentalism that might be read into a weak theology. Instead, we have shown through the ‘identification’ or ‘thematization’ above of the three pillars of theopoetics, that

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<sup>953</sup> See David L. Miller, “Theopoetry or Theopoetics,” in *Cross Currents* 60. 1 (March, 2010), pp. 6-23.



Caputo is deeply concerned with materiality. The event does not ‘suspend’ the material in the sense of holding it up, nor does it make an exception of materiality in favor of some ‘beyond.’ The event, which goes by the name of God, is constitutive of material reality even as it exceeds it. Such excess, however, does not make a ‘scandal of particularity,’<sup>954</sup> because Caputo affirms, for example, that radical theology *derives* from confessional theology, or the messianic is not possible without concrete messianisms. The excess of the event in radical theology is an inevitability of spacing and a structural condition of difference, such ‘archi-violence’ is not ethical violence against the particular, but the constitutive risk of what we cannot see coming.

#### IV. Avoiding the Third-Way of Theopoetics?

If, in the ‘thematization’ or ‘identification’ of the three pills of theopoetics, we have presented the resources of a radical theology that circumvents the ambitions of a ‘politics of presence’ while also not denigrating the particular, then should we not prescribe these pills as ‘treatment’ for our communities? Will such a regimen of medicaments not give us the ‘god *without* sovereignty’ that we have been looking for? Does radical theology’s theopoetics not provide an answer to Richard Kearney’s question, “how do we build a politics of practice...[h]ow do we *do* the good, justice, hospitality? What is to be done?”<sup>955</sup> A tentative answer lies in the use of the scare quotes around ‘thematization’ and ‘identification,’ and what Johann Meylahn calls the unavoidable trap of reducing theopoetics to a ‘third way.’<sup>956</sup>

In his study, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*, Meylahn suggests theopoetics as an exemplary narrative between theopoetry and theopolitics.<sup>957</sup> He reads theopoetics through the incarnate Word, where Christ’s crucifixion is the result of the incarnation as the Word becoming flesh (writing/*différance*): “because of the disruption and deconstruction this writing causes in the text or *context* and thereby challenges the powers that be.”<sup>958</sup> The crucifixion of Christ by the powers that be is the attempt to arrest the play of *différance*, to stop the questioning of certainty that ‘the certainty of uncertainty’ brings with the

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<sup>954</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 59, 116.

<sup>955</sup> Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman (eds.) *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pg. 66. Although these specific questions arose in the dialogue with Catherine Keller in this volume, Kearney is explicitly referencing Caputo and his ‘deconstructionist friends.’

<sup>956</sup> The discussion here follows closely Johann Meylahn’s closing remarks in *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*.

<sup>957</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 310-321.

<sup>958</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 317.

incarnated Christ as writing/*différance*. Meylahn's Christo-poetics<sup>959</sup> or theopoetics, echoes the itinerary of theopoetics being pursued with respect to Caputo's radical theology.<sup>960</sup> Meylahn cautions, however, that even 'Jewish-Christian' and not least 'Western and Lutheran' God-talk may need to be further disturbed lest it begin to consider itself the next 'best way.' He goes on to present the 'Eastern other' as the Byzantine holy fool to enact this disturbance. There are two paths of disturbance to postmodern theopoetics: one is a 'third-way' between wisdom and folly, the tradition of negative theology or *mōrosophia*,<sup>961</sup> and the other is the Byzantine holy fools known as the *salos*, the 'the fools for Christ.'<sup>962</sup>

*Mōrosophia* develops into a kind of marginal orthodoxy, Meylahn says, with a *genos* of identifiable features that can be traced from Socrates to Erasmus. It's path to wisdom is not through the *logos* or *mythos* but in a different order of knowledge and illumination (*sapientia*) which embraces ignorance or folly. This *way* (*orthos*) to wisdom was not reserved for a select few, but communicated and passed on; disciples could learn this path of illumination toward apotheosis through principles and techniques. In dialogue with Peter Phan, who argues for *mōrosophia* as a way to wisdom in postmodernity, Meylahn intimates that *mōrosophia* is not so far removed from theopoetics, but still falls into the trap of reducing the other to the Same in its production of a *way* with a method and distinct *telos*.<sup>963</sup> In contrast, Meylahn argues that *mōrosophia* needs to be re-inscribed back into the text. He offers the Byzantine other: 'the fools of Christ' (*salos*) who deconstruct any attempt at orthodoxy. These holy fools are more radical because they challenged the congealment of the monastic tradition of the first desert radicals (who themselves had challenged the traditions of the institutional church), by living ascetically against asceticism.<sup>964</sup>

The crucial characteristic of the *salos* is that they don't have disciples because they have no 'way' to be followed. If they had a way (*orthos*), this would lead either to 'vainglory' because

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<sup>959</sup> See Johann Meylahn, "Postfoundational practical theology as public Christology" in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35. 2 (2014), Art. #875, 11 pages. Accessed at: <http://dx.doi.org/10/4102/ve.v35i2.875>.

<sup>960</sup> "Theopoetics, which is without author, meaning, order or finality, remains open for the unknown, unthought and impossible other always still to come within the text." Meylahn, *The limits and possibilities of post-metaphysical God-talk*, pg. 321.

<sup>961</sup> Ibid., pp. 325-331.

<sup>962</sup> Ibid., pp. 331-344.

<sup>963</sup> Ibid., pp. 328-331. See Peter Phan, "The wisdom of Holy Fools in Postmodernity," in *Theological Studies* 62., pp. 730-752.

<sup>964</sup> "The holy fools claimed and exposed the madness (folly) of the desert fathers and mothers as a form of vainglory (kind-of-orthopraxis) and the only way they could deconstruct that was to pretend madness by deconstructing anything that ever tried to rise up to be *the* signified, thus often doing things against the law, taking on guilt for things they did not do, physically and verbally abusing people who sought their counsel and all this so that they would not be lifted high as the new master (wisdom) or new truth of *the* way. Their spiritual devotion was purely secret and any public activity was designed to keep the secret secret." Ibid, pg. 334.

it could be attributed to themselves, or if they attributed this way to God it would become idolatry, which is what the negative theology of the early monastics was trying to resist. Instead, the salos realizing this double bind, had to deny the possibility of holiness and keep concealed their ‘unholy-holiness’ from others lest it become a program to be followed. The logical conclusion is that they had to pretend to be mad, the ‘madness’ or the possible impossibility of truly welcoming radical alterity. Thus, Meylahn concludes, the “holy madness of the salos is not a way because it gives way to the other and thus any construction of the same is transgressed (deconstructed).”<sup>965</sup>

The salos’ attempt to radicalize the Pauline theological motif of living ‘as if not,’ in absolute humility and dependence on grace alone, even by making a mockery of such an attempt, is structurally impossible – there is no pure gift as Derrida would say. Despite this impossibility, Meylahn says that they continue to “seek to *live* *différance*, to deconstruct what is (the Same) with what is other.”<sup>966</sup>

What Meylahn’s discussion illustrates for our purposes, is that the three pills of theopoetics of radical theology cannot be reduced to a formulaic application. In this respect, we should heed the fact that radical theopoetics are ‘pills’ and not ‘pillars’ – they are like the Derridian supplement or *pharmakon* that could also be the cause of death. Treatment is also the source of a risk/threat, or the possibility of cosmic destruction, perhaps. And yet, just as the salos seek to ‘live’ the impossibility of radical self-denial, Meylahn says that we “can identify four characteristics of the salos and thereby reduce them to a kind-of-theme as one is obliged to do.”<sup>967</sup> Therefore, while theopoetics can neither simply be a program or a prescription to be taken for a cure – though it will certainly go a long way in providing the resources for thinking sovereignty otherwise – it is nonetheless, something that we ‘live’ and are ‘obliged to do.’ We will never cease negotiating the aporia between the ‘thematization’ (identification) of theopoetics with its traces of Christian pedigree, and the impossibility of the coming event which may not be theopoetics at all. Meylahn describes this negotiation as a “*mad* poetical dance...a theopoetical foolish dance...that creates and dissimulates itself as it goes along.”<sup>968</sup> Theopoetics is like the ‘mad poetical dance’ of a radical political theology, and it may just be the stuff of a poetical-political revolution of sovereignty, perhaps.

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<sup>965</sup> Ibid., pg. 340

<sup>966</sup> Ibid., pg. 343. Emphasis added.

<sup>967</sup> Ibid.

<sup>968</sup> Ibid., pg. 344.

## V. A Conclusion: 'The King is Dead – Long Live the King!'

The well-known epanalepsis, 'The King is dead, long live the King!' (*'Le roi est mort, vive le roi!'*), which most likely originated in the early sixteenth century at the interment of the French King, Louis XII,<sup>969</sup> was a funeral ceremonial rite performed to secure the public perpetuity of the sovereign, while simultaneously announcing the death of the old monarch. The phrase captures the problematic set out in the opening of this study, which recalls Lacan's gesture to the disgruntled students, that once the old sovereign/master is gone, it will soon be replaced by another – 'long live the King!' This was the important move made in Carl Schmitt's theory of the political, and which we have seen at work throughout the loci of Caputo's oeuvre: the *sovereign* autonomous ethical subject, the *sovereign* discourse of religion/theology, and the *sovereign* omnipotent God as the 'thesis' of theogony that provides the structure for these other sovereigns. The old God (King/sovereign/master) of metaphysics may have perished, but he still lives on, "[o]ne has simply changed sovereigns," Derrida says, "[t]he sovereignty of the people or of the nation merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure."<sup>970</sup>

But there has been another way to read this 'Long live the King.' It goes by various names and is signaled in what we have been calling 'the event' or *the event of sovereignty*. At the conclusion of a study, which can only be tentative, it will be suggested that Caputo's radical theology of the event – and the discursive resources of theopoetics we have traced above – is (perhaps) the milieu or 'preparation' in which to affect a radical 'poetical-political' revolution of sovereignty. This will be argued by demonstrating how Derrida's reading of Paul Celan's poetry in *The Beast and the Sovereign* attempts just such a revolution.<sup>971</sup> Derrida finds in Celan's use of poetry (*Dichtung*)<sup>972</sup> a 'majesty' which exceeds that of the classical sovereign and is itself always open to question. This reading mirrors and confirms the thesis set out in the

<sup>969</sup> See Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Kings Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press [1957] 2016), pp. 410-412. Kantorowicz suggests that earlier versions can be traced back to the succession of King Henry VI in 1422, then still only an infant, pp. 410-411.

<sup>970</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, pg. 282.

<sup>971</sup> This reading will be restricted to the relevant sections in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, as it consists neither in a comprehensive reading of Celan nor of Derrida's understanding of poetry. The reader should note, however, Derrida's important book dedicated to Celan, wherein many of the themes encountered below are already present. See Jacques Derrida, Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (eds.) *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). See especially, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," pp. 65-96 and "Majesties," pp. 108-134. See also Paul Celan's speech on which Derrida's comment are based; Paul Celan, Jerry Glenn (trans.) "The Meridian" in *Ibid.*, pp. 173-185. Some of the insights in this section are drawn from Patrick McLane, "Sovereignty without Mastery" in *Societies* 3 (Dec, 2012), pp. 1-15.

<sup>972</sup> Jerry Glenn translates *Dichtung* as 'literature,' but it can also be translated as 'poetry,' as Rosemary Waldrop does, see Paul Celan, Rosemary Waldrop (trans.) "The Meridian" in *Collected Prose* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 37-55.

introduction of this study, namely, that the theopoetics of radical theology in the work of John Caputo, offers the resources and therefore the locus for a radical *political* theology, because it understands itself to be a “poetic revolution in the political revolution,” which is always “signed by the repetition of the ‘perhaps’s’ and the ‘who knows.’”<sup>973</sup>

*The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001-02)<sup>974</sup> is a complex work that draws on many of Derrida’s previously published material, and interacts with a diverse range of themes and an equally plural group of thinkers; from Aristotle to Rousseau, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Schmitt, Lacan, Celan, Heidegger, Valéry, Deleuze, Marin, Foucault and Agamben. At a basic level, as the volume’s title suggests, Derrida wants to disturb the distinction between sovereign man and the beastly animal. One way he accomplishes this is by arguing that the sovereign master makes himself out to be ‘responsible,’ while the enemy is ‘reactive’ and driven by animal instinct. The latter is why Hobbes refers to man as a ‘wolf’ in the state of nature, following which, a sovereign power is needed to restrain man’s predatory beastly passions.<sup>975</sup> It is also why he draws on Rousseau’s ‘werewolf’ from the *Confessions*, ‘loup-garou,’ which also means ‘outlaw,’ someone who is outside of the law.<sup>976</sup> But Derrida argues that this status of sovereign responsibility becomes reactive (beastly) precisely through its insistent, mechanical-instinctual claim to be responsible.<sup>977</sup> The sovereign suspends its own law in order to be sovereign and, therefore, becomes the beast or the out-law (or the ‘rogue’ state as we saw above.) Derrida wishes to pursue forms of thinking that would reveal this slippage (impossibility) between responsibility and reactivity, sovereign and beast, in order to be *more* responsible: “having doubts about responsibility, decision, one’s own being-ethical, can be, or so it seems to me, and ought to perhaps remain, the indefeasible essence of ethics, of decision, and of responsibility.”<sup>978</sup>

Derrida traces a form of thinking in the poetics of Paul Celan, which undermines the classical notion of sovereignty and posits a new ‘poetic majesty.’ In the eight and tenth sessions of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, he follows the comments Celan makes in his “The Meridian” speech

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<sup>973</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, pg. 273.

<sup>974</sup> We will reference only the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* here. This inaugural volume is a complete transcription of thirteen sessions Derrida gave in Paris between December 12, 2001 and March 27, 2002 and is part of a larger English translation project to posthumously publish all of Derrida’s seminars.

<sup>975</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 92.

<sup>976</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64. This logic plays out in the othering of humans who are regarded more like animals and must therefore be mastered. Judith Butler traces this logic in the Guantanamo Bay prisoners, who are “likened to caged and restrained animals.” See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), pg. 73.

<sup>977</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, pg. 120.

<sup>978</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 119.

on the occasion of receiving a prize in memory of Georg Büchner.<sup>979</sup> Celan discusses the difficulties of separating art from the mechanical-like robotics of syntax and aesthetic conventions; it is like the Medusa's head which turns things into stone.<sup>980</sup> Referring to Büchner's play, *Danton's Death*, Celan suggests a moment wherein poetry transcends this mechanical art. This moment is what interests Derrida. The scene plays out in the context of the French Revolution, where the revolutionary terror are guillotining Dantonists. Before Camille Desmoulins is about to be executed, his wife Lucile Duplessis, cries out 'Long live the King!' and is then led away presumably to her own execution. Celan notes that this expression is not an oath to the monarch (they are Dantonists after all), but "a tribute to the majesty of the absurd," which is, "I believe...poetry." In speaking of the 'majesty' accorded to poetry and not to the classical sovereign, Derrida writes:

Celan's gesture in resorting to the word 'majesty' — and this is what matters most to me here, at least in the context of this seminar — is a gesture that consists in placing one majesty above another, and thus upping the ante with respect to sovereignty. An upping that attempts to change the meaning of majesty or sovereignty, to make its meaning mutate, while keeping the old word...There is the sovereign majesty of the sovereign, the King, and there is, more majestic or differently majestic, more sovereign or differently, the majesty of poetry, or the majesty of the absurd insofar as it bears witness to the presence of the human.<sup>981</sup>

This alternate form of sovereign poetics, paradoxically, in a Dantonist's pronouncement of 'Long live the King!' is the renouncement of the mechanical understanding of art, of its logic, syntax and linguistic conventions, and thus mirrors theopoetics. The latter is the case, insofar as theopoetics is not a logic of the discourse of God, but a poetics of the event going on in the name of God. There is a further point Derrida wishes to make, however, which reiterates the non-avoidance of the 'third way' of theopoetics. Before the text just quoted above, Derrida draws our attention to Celan's 'I believe...' "This 'I believe' ... seems to imply," he says, "'I believe where, I believe because, it is absurd, *credo quia absurdum*.'" <sup>982</sup> Celan's attempt to 'up the ante' in this new poetics of sovereignty is qualified by his own faith in the possibility of the absurdity of Lucile's pronouncement. In other words, Celan's poetics is an admission ('I

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<sup>979</sup> Ibid., pp. 216-220; pp. 225-235 and pp. 259-273.

<sup>980</sup> Celan, Jerry Glenn (trans.), "The Meridian," in Derrida, *Sovereignities in Questions*, pg. 176.

<sup>981</sup> Ibid., pg. 230.

<sup>982</sup> Ibid.



believe') that Lucile's 'Long Live the King!' is a counterstatement that always retains the possibility that it is not, that it could also be a renouncement of the revolution. Thus, Celan's majesty of poetry or poetics of sovereignty, just as in radical theology's theopoetics, is itself an act of faith, a wager, for it is always at risk of poetic convention or thematic identification.

This act of faith is what Derrida calls in the tenth session the 'division,' 'parting' and 'dissociation' of the present in the "majesty of the poetic present."<sup>983</sup> Poetic sovereignty or theopoetics involves a 'double division.' On the one hand the distinction is made between the sovereign majesty and the majesty of poetry, or we could say sovereignty and theopoetics.<sup>984</sup> And on the other hand, the majesty of poetry or theopoetics is *itself* divided between its own presence and "the other present, the present of the other to whom the poem makes a present of its time, thus in a *Mitsprechen*, letting the time of the other, its own time."<sup>985</sup> The poetic majesty of the 'Absurd' which makes present the present of the other, Celan calls 'stepping outside the human' (*ein Hinaustreten aus dem Menschlichen*). This movement or *Weg*, which is *unheimlich*, is the encounter with the Other; the encounter "to come from the horizon of the distant and the foreign."<sup>986</sup> The encounter with the other is always inscribed in the modality of 'perhaps' ('I believe'), since this path of poetry "is less something that *is* than an event, the coming of an event that happens [*arrive*]."<sup>987</sup>

What is seen here are two senses of the poetic vision that can be described as two revolutions. The first is the poetic revolution encountered in the ambiguity of the counterstatement, 'Long Live the King!' This poetics is another form of sovereign majesty, one not unlike the theopoetics we have argued for in this chapter. It transcends the mechanization of theo-logic and therefore political sovereignty/majesty through the majesty of the Absurd (the event), and bears witness to 'the presence of the human.' The second sense is a 'revolution in the revolution,' where the poetic majesty of the Absurd *itself* encounters the Other, and which is no longer a counterstatement nor majestic word, "but a terrifying silence, an arrest that strikes speech dumb."<sup>988</sup> This is the radical theopoetics of the perhaps, which does not reduce the temporality of the other, but which is an "improbable poetry ('who knows') but a poetry to take one's breath away and turn it."<sup>989</sup> Derrida says that this revolution "perhaps prepares

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<sup>983</sup> Ibid., pg. 260.

<sup>984</sup> Ibid., pg. 259.

<sup>985</sup> Ibid., pg. 260.

<sup>986</sup> Ibid., pg. 269.

<sup>987</sup> Ibid., pg. 267.

<sup>988</sup> Ibid., pg. 270.

<sup>989</sup> Ibid., pg. 272.

some poetic revolution in the political revolution” and which we are suggesting is the site of a radical political theology. For a radical political theology thinks the event of sovereignty (political revolution), as the theopoetics of a god to come, which is itself a wager on this discourse and therefore radically exposed to the other and infinitely open to question (poetic revolution). The theopoetics of radical political theology, therefore, perhaps prepares the inauguration of the political revolution of sovereignty by means of a radical poetic revolution. We can say then that radical political theology is the ‘poetical-political revolution’ of sovereignty as such. The King is dead, indeed. ‘Long Live the King!’

## Postscript

As a philosophical-theological reflection on the political-theological concept of sovereignty, this study has concluded by trying to think John D. Caputo's radical theology as a contribution to a radical *political* theology. To this extent, it did *not* treat a 'praxis' of radical political theology. Instead, it strategically offered the resources of radical theology *descriptively* rather than prescriptively, that is, as "*a work of thought that thinks the structural possibility*"<sup>990</sup> of a radical political theology. Chapter six sought to emphasize that to think this structural possibility of a radical political theology one does not inhabit a 'pure messianic' space, but rather that such a possibility must always emerge from "the lushness of the colors of concrete life," and "the oases of the living faiths of historical revelations."<sup>991</sup> The latter was taken up with respect to the question of the status of determinate religion or the 'with' in a religion *without* religion. It was then demonstrated that Caputo does not denigrate the material, determinate, or confessional forms of concrete life, but rather that the religious impulse in radical theology reminds these particular beliefs, practices and actions, that they are always haunted by an undecidability of being determined otherwise. This allayed the charge that Caputo (or Derrida) are guilty of being 'against' institutions, concrete beliefs, or confessional religion. Indeed, Caputo would argue that to think the structural possibility of a religion *without* religion (the event) one would need a horizon of expectation relative to the event which breaches it. Thus, religion *without* religion might be thought of less as a disturbance of determinate religion, than as the disturbance *already going on in* determinate religion (insistence).

It is in light of these conclusions that one should interpret questions of 'praxis' or a 'politics of practice.' Indeed, insofar as this study is theological, one might go further to say that the church — as arguably *the* political manifestation of Christianity — in the view of radical theology, can be understood by a certain 'weak' ecclesiology. It should be clear that such an ecclesiology would be 'weak' or 'radical,' because it would always remain infinitely open to its Other. To be precise, this does not thereby imply that Caputo's radical theology imposes a *competing* ecclesiology, "*a rival body of beliefs*" (*croyances*), one that is to be inhabited or around which a church might form. It is rather a theopoetics; a contingent discourse which gives linguistic existence to the events being called within confessional churches. However,

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<sup>990</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, pg. 195.

<sup>991</sup> John D. Caputo, "Only as Hauntology is Religion without Religion Possible" in Marko Zlomislíć and Neal DeRoo (eds.) *Cross and Khôra*, pp. 112-113. See chapter five where we have clarified the important messianic-messianism distinction.

the pragmatic sense of ‘weakness’ here might require further attention, for up until now the activity of a radical theology has been carried out as a ‘high-level’ discourse of philosophical and theological reflection. Is not the weakness or limitation of a radical political theology, then, the fact that we do not yet know how it ought to be ‘carried out?’ In a slightly different sense, one might ask how we are to ‘ingest’ the three pills of radical theology’s theopoetics?

In this regard, it should be noted that Caputo has made a number of attempts to address his thought to a ‘public’ audience, both those with and without religious faith.<sup>992</sup> Furthermore, he also regularly engages in podcasts and webinar sessions, as well as public speaking and preaching engagements at local churches. Caputo’s public activity, therefore, could be said to be an example of what an attempt to expose what is *already going on in* determinate religion, might look like.<sup>993</sup> It follows that such public engagements would influence these communities’ own self-reflections as to what it means to be a ‘community *without* community.’<sup>994</sup> Such communities, upon self-reflection would, therefore, engage a ‘praxis’ of being both open to the Other (‘theo-praxis’)<sup>995</sup> and of being active critics of those formations that would block the Other’s access.<sup>996</sup> To use an ‘inelegant,’ as she calls it, but nonetheless felicitous phrase from Katherine Sarah Moody, this would be a “religion without religion *within* religion.”<sup>997</sup> And thus, the discursive form of radical theological reflection becomes inscribed within the ‘activity’ or expressive acts of a community.

Yet, as Moody has further pointed out, we still do not have a sense of what it might entail to ‘practice’ or to ‘learn to live’ this religion without religion *within* religion. She wonders whether there might be “*specific* religious practices – discursive, communicative or expressive acts – that prime participants to learn to live in a dis/associative space between

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<sup>992</sup> See John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2016).

<sup>993</sup> Caputo will continue to expand this project of exposing the deconstructive elements already at work within Christianity in 2019, with a forthcoming publication, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019), where he will interrogate Martin Luther’s theology of the cross.

<sup>994</sup> Caputo speaks about a two-fold movement of historical *association* (our confessional community, or any ‘life-world’ in which we find ourselves), and messianic *dissociation*, ‘which prevents these names from freezing over.’ Katherine Sarah Moody writes that these two movements should be understood “within one two-fold moment. Historical association and messianic dissociation are made together in what might be called one moment *dis/association*.” See Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God,” pp. 303-305 quoted in Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, pg. 134.

<sup>995</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, pp. 118-128.

<sup>996</sup> Caputo has always remained critical of the Christian Right and its alignment with political ambitions of the Republican Party for example. This was the target of much of his criticism in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, see pp. 89-116. Moreover, in this political line, Caputo will also be contributing to a new critical volume edited by Jeffrey W. Robbins and Clayton Crockett, *Doing Theology in the Age of Trump: A Critical Report on Christian Nationalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

<sup>997</sup> Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, pg. 123.

their theism and its ‘others,’ including atheism?” And what “might an a/theistic response to the event look like in the context of religious community?”<sup>998</sup> We could also ask, alternatively, what ‘radical rituals,’ ‘radical liturgies’ or ‘radical symbolic acts’ might cultivate a critical disposition toward our reliance on the normative status of our religious beliefs? To this end Caputo has pointed to the ‘postmodern liturgy’ of Peter Rollins and his Ikon collective in Belfast,<sup>999</sup> which also identifies with the ‘Emerging Church Movement.’<sup>1000</sup> In her study, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity* (2015), Moody employs the radical theologies of Žižek and Caputo to evaluate the ‘emerging ir/religious practices’ in the work of Rollins and Kester Brewin, and identifies three ‘emerging’ areas that might constitute “concrete religious and potentially political practices.”<sup>1001</sup> Moody’s critical insight is to suggest that these areas – ‘faithful betrayal,’ ‘transformative art’ and ‘suspended space’ – if read through Caputo’s ‘religion without religion’ and Žižek’s ‘fighting collective,’ neither simply embellish or contemporize stale worship or liturgy,<sup>1002</sup> nor do they contribute to the ‘debt economy’ of neoliberalism wherein subjects are required “to become active entrepreneurs of the self,” who continually have to create, produce, and market every aspect of life for consumption. Rather, through the continual practices of identity suspension that is cultivated by Rollins and Brewin’s radical liturgies, there is not an assimilation to this economic and political order, but a ‘contestation’ of the “disciplinary apparatus of neoliberal capitalism.”<sup>1003</sup> Moody recommends that further research would need to be conducted to empirically verify her claim that the discursive practices, or radical liturgies in the ‘a/theistic imaginaries’ of the Emerging Church Movement, *do* indeed yield positive transformation to social, economic and political orders. In her final paragraph, she also asks about the need for further investigation into the deconstructive theology of Caputo (as well as Žižek) “precisely as [a] *political* theolog[y],” to which the radical *political* theology argued for in this study, commends itself as a modest contribution.

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<sup>998</sup> Ibid., pg. 136. Emphasis added.

<sup>999</sup> Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, pp. 129-134. See Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, (Orleans, MA: Paraclete, 2006).

<sup>1000</sup> For the most comprehensive sociological study of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) see Gerardo Martí and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>1001</sup> Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, pg. 27.

<sup>1002</sup> Ibid., pp. 226-238.

<sup>1003</sup> Ibid., pg. 237.

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